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The Crown of Life

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Bard

The Crown of Life

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Thatcher Snyder

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
May 2016

For Laura Cella

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Dabo tibi coronam vitae
—Bard College Motto

*She answer'd sadly to the lover's moan,
Sigh'd back his sighs and groan'd to ev'ry groan:
"Ah youth! belov'd in vain," Narcissus cries;
"Ah youth! belov'd in vain," the nymph replies.
— Metamorphoses, Dryden Trans.*

◇◇◇ I ◇◇◇

The bar was named Adolph's, which lent itself to many undergraduate jokes about Nazism and the beer hall putsch. Upon attaining his appointment at Beard College, Soto learned that the Adolph in question had been a bishop of the Episcopal Church, presiding over the diocese that included Upstate New York. After many years of teaching in seminaries across New England, Adolph established the college along with John Beard, President of New York Life Insurance and Trust Company. The wife of a history professor, who worked on the board of so-and-so Historical Preservation Society, informed Soto of the college's past. When Soto met her, she had been shoeless, holding an uncorked bottle of wine.

Soto had chosen to meet his thesis student at Adolph's, because his office was currently being renovated, the domain of workmen in smocks and gallons upon gallons of white primer. The floor of his living room could barely be seen underneath the expanding body of books—refugees from the office, who had made it their new home.

He had been waiting for about fifteen minutes, quietly nursing something that the bar called a Belgian Grapefruit Shandy, when a slight blonde girl slid into the booth across from him.

"Nina," she said, raising a hand in greeting. The yellow light from the exposed "Edison style" bulb, glinted off a small stud in the girl's left nostril. He noticed a tattoo on her left forearm. A web of lines fanned outwards from one side of the

underarm to the other, congregating thick enough in some areas to create little black splotches, and thin enough in others to see the slightness of the lines, crosshatching like fibres of silk. In the center of the tattoo floated a misshapen circle of skin.

"It's a sonogram," said Nina, recognizing his curiosity. "An echo. That little oval you see right there is me."

Soto smiled. He was used to the brashness of young people. When he was in college himself, he had been selfish and overconfident, convinced of the inevitability that someone would recognize his talent. That had changed when he graduated. He worked, for years, as a gas station attendant, a security guard, a stockboy. He spent his free time writing from his room in a dilapidated tenement complex, receiving rejection after rejection. Years later, seemingly more by chance than talent, he began to succeed.

"Very cute," he said, flatly. "A picture of yourself on yourself. Now, you sent me some ideas over the summer. What do you want to do with your thesis? And, what do you want me to help you with?"

From her bag, Nina retrieved a book bound in green and white cloth. She swaddled it in her arms for a moment, as though the book were a fragile child, bones still jigsawing together, before setting it down gently on the table.

It was titled *The Crown of Life*. Soto had written the book during his first few years out of college, after his father had died. Soto remembered feeling guilty, presenting private drama as public tragedy. He had since realized that writing was, for him, a method of control. It let him structure his emotions, and reorder the world

as he saw fit. He considered the book a failure. For, after it had been published, the world did not change. His father did not return. The guilt did not dissipate.

"I want you to help me write a book like yours," Nina said. "A distillation of my experience."

Soto sighed. Behind Nina's head was a flashing neon sign of a Greek goddess, clad in a cobalt chiton, whose clean white wings changed position with every flash. In one hand the goddess held an orange whip. In the other she held a stein of beer, a clashing of epochs and cultures that Soto found to be indicative of contemporary advertising, schooled in Postmodern Theory and the dirty thrill of pastiche. A golden O gave the Goddess a solar corona. Inside of the O, in verdant green, was written *Rhamnusia Stout: Punisher of Hubris*.

"If you're looking for fidelity to reality, go to Joyce. He's the master. For psychological realism go to Shakespeare. For Realism as a school maybe Flaubert or Tolstoy."

"I can't relate to any of them."

"You can't relate to Shakespeare?"

"In a manner of speaking. I want to write about my life. Shakespeare fails in that regard."

Nina paused to suck on a tooth.

"Like the quality of my life," she continued. "The way my life is. I want to put down a monument of myself, to show that I was here. That's um..." She laughed nervously. Her eyes widened so that Soto could see the febrile whiteness of the sclerae, her deep green irises straining. "That's it."

To his surprise, Soto felt a welling of sympathy. He understood Nina's impulse. She did not want to disappear, unremarked, unremembered. He looked at his book. What Nina carried with her, whether she knew it or not, was his father's gravestone. A monument that Soto had himself erected. Soto had buried his father within the pages of his book. It was all there—pain, shame, hatred, guilt. The book was supposed to exorcise these ghosts. Instead, it amplified them, as though Soto had somehow entombed his father within himself, so that all his father's memories had been subsumed by his own. It were as though the old man had been erased from the Earth.



Soto heard the swift rush of creek water before he reached the white cottage that housed Beard's writing department. Cephisus House was named after an esteemed professor, in memoriam. After the professor had died, the building was retrofitted in the style of an administrative office to accommodate the professors of Creative Writing.

Soto greatly appreciated Cephisus House's placement on campus, about a ten-minute walk from the main quad. The feeling of seclusion that the building created, surrounded by the woods and creek, made Soto perfectly comfortable doing his work, or losing himself in a book for a couple of hours, bathed in auric sunlight.

The rumble of the creek as it snaked behind the building, fluvial current knocking against the sedimentary fragments of lost ecological ages, was a kind of white noise that relaxed Soto as he read, his eyes constantly moving from the page to fix upon some piece of lint or dust that swirled freely in the light, and back again.

Soto loved the interplay of nature and man, intellect and commerce, creativity and rationality, that pervaded the landscape site of Cephisus House. This great white monument, a white Kaaba to which students made pilgrimage to learn the secrets of writing (the sanctified creation of persons) was, it seemed to Soto, perfectly contrasted by the red and yellow spangling of Autumn oak leaves, the uneven hash of moist dirt, and the anarchic call of songbirds, whose siren song always tempted him to give chase, disappearing forever into the thick wood.

By the time he reached his destination, Soto's thighs were chafing. He readjusted his pants—gray and woolen, a poor choice for the weather—before entering the building. He ascended to an office on the second floor. A thin older man wearing a tailored fustian worker's shirt, his upper lip bedecked with a thick growth of hair that curled at the ends, rose from behind a desk to greet Soto.

"Many thanks for your timely arrival. I apologize for the inconvenience," said the man. His voice had the flat, bored quality of someone who had given up on trying to interest his audience. Earlier in his career, Abner Eptazoes had been a well-respected poet known for his decidedly non-academic approach to the written form. But, that had been long before Soto's time. Now, even though he still preferred the aesthetic trappings of the poet, Abner spent most of his time occupied with administrative procedure.

"How are you, Kevin?"

"I'm well, Abner. Thank you for asking."

Abner pulled on the collar of his shirt, a tic that infuriated Soto, as though Abner had come directly to his office from work at a textile mill, and needed to air himself out.

Abner ahemed, and continued. "I just want to know if you need anything."

"Everything's fine," Soto said, curtly.

"Kevin..."

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"This... malaise..."

"Excuse me?"

"When Elise left..."

"Abner," Soto said, somewhat louder than he had meant to. "Stop."

"I am offering you my help."

"Thank you. I don't want it."

"Respectfully, I need you to stop pushing me away."

"This is none of your business."

"No, it's not. But, once it is..."

"Stop. You're treating me like a child."

"Childhood," Abner said with a satisfaction that Soto found irritatingly patrician, "is intransigent."

"That's not the point. I'm not a child, please don't treat me as such." Soto was unused to the man's stubbornness and persistence—a holdover from Abner's youth,

when he was a fringe poet, rejection slips papering his walls pink. He grew used to be ignored, to saying what he wanted regardless of response, so that when the impersonal addresses became handwritten in fountain pen, cobalt ink seeping into the creamy magazine stock, he had a muscular attrition, to which he cleaved, almost always receiving his desired result.

“Kevin, this is not an attack on you. Accept what help you can. It won’t come often.”

‡‡

The meeting ended only after Soto told Abner that he was heading into the city that evening to meet some friends from graduate school. Someone in his class, Alana, had published her first novel. He remembered disliking her prose. Her sentences, for him, yowled like hungry cats, starved for adjectives, the occasional salubrious metaphor. Instead, these sinewy beasts ate from a greasy pile of Anglo-Saxon words that, to Soto’s mind, our lexicon had lthrown in the alley behind the gustatory space of language, as though ashamed. Her work had not been popular among the students. In fact, Alana had been something of a joke. Much of the time, in their workshops together, she could be found furiously polishing at small smudges on her glasses with a microfiber cloth, until their professor, a kindly older woman who had published a series of novels to modest critical acclaim, would gently

address Alana, voice light and airy like a salt breeze. Surprised, Alana's head would snap up, her mouth emitting a slight leporine squeak. Despite himself, Soto had found this innocence, or obtuseness, absurdly charming, and they had grown closer after the program's end. He was excited to see her.

Soto stuffed his toiletries in a worn travel bag the color of a ripe avocado. Elise had bought him the bag on a trip to Mexico, to appraise the work of a Nahua muralist.

Feeling somewhat faint, Soto splashed water on his face. Its cold bloom roused him. He stood quietly for a moment, looking at himself in the mirror. Soto had the feeling that his face did not quite fit him—that it was both more handsome and more unpleasant than the image he had in his head. He stared intently at the object of his reflection, having forgotten the picture of consciousness displayed there. Many in the past had told Soto that he always seemed angry. Whenever he looked at himself in the mirror, he was struck by the utter disparity between his internal states and his outward expression, as though his emotions had emigrated to his face, and his features were still trying to find the best way to house them.

Surveying the geographies of his skin, Soto noticed a small constellation of pimples on his forehead. A brutish urge forced itself upon him, and he moved his fingers closer to his face, intending to pop the blemishes. Elise had hated that—the small volcano of skin and blood, forehead discolored white and pale red. She had bought him all sorts of creams. He looked at himself again. "Selfish," he thought. He grabbed a tube from behind the mirror and embrocated his face, spreading the unguent in beige spirals. Eventually the whole became covered in a soft mask. Soto

appraised his new face, trying to determine its relative worth. He appreciated the mask's lack of features, but that same lack frightened him. For a few minutes, he allowed the mask to harden into a shell. This was penance, he thought. A small and overdue apology.

Skin fresh, the ablution performed, Soto began to pack. He methodically folded two of the three collared shirts that he owned, and placed them in a battered leather travel bag that he had inherited upon his father's passing. Growing up in an old Pennsylvania steel town, his father had worked three jobs to pay his college tuition. The one luxury that he had allowed himself was that leather carrier, the first item that he knew his classmates would see. Soto's father wanted to leave the impression that he was wealthy. But, once he became familiar with his peers, many of whom hailed from the sort of upper-crust New York family whose life was dictated by the social register. Soto's father dropped the pretension.

Soto himself was never allowed luxury. Instead, he was treated to his father's cold denunciations of entitlement and the moral turpitude of the rich. (Soto had only ever received one birthday present: a chrome tricycle.) When his father died, struck low by a tumor that lodged itself barnacle-like on the hull of his brain, Soto received no inheritance but his father's carrier bag, a spectrogram of wear inscribed upon its skin. This was a reminder, Soto bitterly supposed, to avoid the narcissisms of society, and face life as prudently as one could.

With prudence, Soto touched the softness of his belly. He took the third collared shirt out of the dresser, and grimly tried it on. He had bought this shirt a few years out of college, when he had sold his first story to a now defunct magazine.

He felt insistently now the need to finish his next book, or he felt he would become a failed writer, lost to time. He had such promise! In school, they thought he would succeed, and succeed brilliantly. Indeed, he was the one to publish first, and attain a university assignment. The one whom his peers could refer to as a “published author.” The one with the book that could be recommended. But, what good was that, when the book was selfish, incomplete. Soto couldn’t bear anymore to read the work of his classmates, because he saw in their success the pervasive nature of his own failure. The more that their books rang with clear truth, the better they assimilated the shape of Soto’s mangled heart.

As he drove to the train station, Soto worried that *The Crown of Life* had affected Nina for the wrong reasons. He was afraid that it would cultivate selfishness. The book had become almost an extension of Soto’s body. He was unable to escape it. Nina had, it seemed, intuited this extension of his body. The book had brought her in front of him.

Soto rushed onto his train as it emitted one final screech. He felt happy and unhappy. This indeterminacy of feeling that seemed to mark him more and more as he aged. When the train slowly pulled out of the station, Soto settled into his seat, and watched sunlight dance on the waters of the Hudson River. He felt unexpectedly playful, and tried to hold on to this caprice for as long as he could.

"It was truly wonderful," said a man in a velvet blazer, speaking loudly so he could be heard over the wholesome static of bar chatter. "Still one of the best books I have read in years."

"Thank you," Soto responded. He smiled widely to hide his suspicion. "That means a lot." He turned back to Alana, with whom he was sitting at the bar's mahogany centerpiece. The man, clearly unaccustomed to such blitheness, opened and closed his mouth. Adjusting his bow-tie, he frowned, and stared into the clear pond of alcohol in his right hand, before gliding away.

Alana laughed. "That man runs a journal out of an apartment in Bed-Stuy. He wrote you a great review." Soto noticed that she was still wearing the glasses from her time in the MFA program.

"I know," said Soto.

"Then why are you being a dick?"

"Because look at him," Soto said. "Look at this." He pointed above the bar to a yellow and red Soviet flag that had been hung above the whiteboard promoting specialty drinks. (Moscow Mule, 8\$; The Kremlin, 10\$; White Russian, 7\$.) Behind him a mass of spindly, well-dressed young literary professionals danced with an awkward exuberance brought on by a surfeit of alcohol to a pop hit from the late 90's.

"Kevin, it was a good book. I don't know why you keep beating yourself up over this."

"I'm not beating myself up..." Soto paused. "...I'm sorry. And congratulations! I loved the reading!" On the dance floor, the DJ, whose day job was as an events coordinator for the literary imprint of a large-scale corporate publishing house, had changed the track to some contemporary upbeat techno, a shade or two off the mainstream.

"Thanks. It was a long time coming."

The reading had been in an independent bookstore in Fort Greene, which had quickly filled with all sorts of tattooed, bespectacled literary types, most of whom, Soto was sure, hadn't read Alana's novel, but were coming to see and be seen, here at this event, as in the city proper, on the strength of a name. Reading with her were two other writers. One had been in the workshop with Soto and Alana. He read from new work, describing the its aim as applying the theory of language poetry (that a poem is a construction in and of language—thus that meaning is generated from the reading of language, or is constructed as such, rather than imbued in the poem by it writer) to Reddit threads and the aesthetics of trolling. It was he who had first noticed Soto sidestep into the shop, so as to avoid the sennet-call of the electronic bell. He had cried out, "Kevin!" at which time Soto winced, and heads turned.

This same poet, Soto saw, was approaching him and Alana at the bar. The man's face had assumed a luminous expression.

"My friend!" he said, clapping Soto twice on the back.

"John!" Soto replied, feigning the enthusiasm that he wished to have.

"Thanks so much for coming to the reading. It's been so long. Alana and I never thought we'd be able to get you down from upstate."

"But we did," Alana said, smiling at Soto

"How's Beard?" asked John. "When we heard, I remember, we were all in a bar somewhere out in Green Point. I think that may have been the last time I saw you—"

"You just disappeared," Alana interrupted, "Out of nowhere. You and Elise."

Soto frowned, ignoring Alana. "I'm very busy. It's good, but there's a lot of work. Grading, classes, staff meetings, and trying to write the new book. I haven't got much time for anything."

John groaned. "I get it. I've been adjuncting at Hunter, and, I mean, it's more trouble than it's worth, really. The kids are great, but I get like 200\$ a class and that only because I've been published places that the college enjoys renewing connection with. Then with editing the journal and working on the new collection..."

"He and his girlfriend are fighting," whispered Alana.

"You had the right idea, Kev. It was smart to leave, to settle down."

"I'm not sure I agree," Kevin said measuredly.

"Your book was great. But, what did it do? What changed? It's poetry, literature, art... It does nothing." He gulped from his beer.

"How's Elise?" he asked.

"They broke up," Alana said sharply.

"Oh," John said, his mouth shaping into a small porthole, behind which a small ocean of saliva was forming.

"No it's..." Soto tried to say.

“No, I’m so sorry,” John interrupted. “But, you know, it’s hard staying together. I’ve been having problems as well. My parents, too, just got divorced. Forty-eight years. It’s insane. They live in this tiny town in Arkansas, if you remember, with a population of like 5000. I asked my mom what she thought she was going to do, like if she would try to see someone new or something, and also she said was that she wanted more “me” time, as though my dad was stifling her...”

Soto remembered the one time he had met John’s parents, soon after he had completed his MFA. John had always played up his background. He wouldn’t hesitate, in the middle of a conversation to sneak in a reference to the cornfield near his childhood home—how the anfractuous twisting of Bernhard’s sentences reminded him of a stalk of corn being whipped about in the wind. Or how the constrictive qualities of a Beckett play mirrored the feeling of small town isolation. Thus, Soto was surprised to learn that both of John’s parents were quite learned, and possessed of a worldliness far beyond anything that John himself had indicated. The father was a professor of Political Science at the University of Arkansas who specialized in the relation of Neoliberalism and Rawlsian Contract Theory (John had been named after the great political philosopher), and the mother was an amateur poet in her own right who ran a small bookshop near the university that was known for hosting a few student readings each semester.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” said Soto. “That must feel strange.”

“Well, you know...” John hesitated. One white canine established itself on the horizon of John’s lower lip. “It’s... It’s nice to be over here, you know? I’m not quite as caught in the middle of it. But, I’m their only child, and, I mean, they have friends,

but it's not quite the same. Well, mostly my mom has her friends. My dad isn't doing so well." He paused for a moment, uncertain. "My dad... He, uh, recently read your book. He said he loved it, told me to pass on the compliment."

Soto heard an echo of resentment in this statement. John's words blinked out from the past. They had been at a dive bar near where Soto had lived at the time. Soto's father had just passed after a prolonged attempt at chemo that left the previously robust chemist shrunken, bereft of blood. Though Soto had expected to feel a wash of sadness, a sort of baptismal rebirth of pure love for this man, he instead felt mostly anger, and confusion. Nothing he had done had made his father happy. He could not love this man who actively made himself unlovable.

"Wow," Soto said mildly, attempting not to make anything of the comment. "Tell him I say thank you."

John flagged down the bartender with an authoritative hand. He had three shots poured, which Soto, John, and Alana raised to eye level.

"To Alana and Kevin."

Soto somberly raised the small glass cup to his mouth, tilted his head back, and felt the poisonous liquid charge at his throat.

##

Stenciled in block letters on a makeshift wall that the gallery had set up as a monumental title card were the words: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

Lining the walls, like family portraits, were oddities: oil figure paintings, something Soto had not seen in a gallery since his high school graduation, where one fellow student had decided that her study of the human figure could buck the prevalent trend towards conceptualism. If he had a better knowledge of art history, Soto would have known that each piece in the gallery was a meticulous reproduction of an older depiction of the apologue of Narcissus and Echo. The first, and most famous, was an oleaginous facsimile of John William Waterhouse’s *Echo and Narcissus*. All pastels, non-classical forms, and naturalist imagery, Echo lounging near a tree, head turned ninety degrees towards Narcissus, held rapt by his reflection in a fresh water pond, Waterhouse had meant to convey the subtle agony of unrequited love. Echo yearns for Narcissus, who, headstrong and immature, can only love himself. Or, perhaps, can only love the image of himself, which he sees mirrored in the pond’s surface, occasionally fractured by an encroaching lily pad. The exhibition’s artist had replaced every face in Waterhouse’s masterpiece with her own. She was Echo, Narcissus, and reflection, staring at herself, who stared at her reflection, who stared back.

Soto recognized a void between Echo and Narcissus; Narcissus and reflection; herself and herself and herself. No figure touched, none could. Each was caught in the inevitable stasis of self-love.

The next frame, made of black mitered wood, contained a replica of Caravaggio's *Narcissus*. The Italian master's use of extreme chiaroscuro stressed the narrow focus of the painting's subject. He emerges out of the black as though out of nothingness, as though nothing in the world were worthy of attention besides himself. He pursues himself. Chasing himself, like a hound chasing his tail, an infinitude, all else recedes from the strange loop. A circle is a world unto itself, a zero. It has no need of an other—an outside. The artist had removed Narcissus' clothes. Her features—soft, aristocratic cheekbones, the independent beauty of an artist—blended perfectly, somehow, into the muscular body of Narcissus, his penis swinging flaccid in the dirty air.

These reproductions were the exhibition. As one inched through the gallery, inching slowly, hesitantly, as though one were in some way invading foreign territory, the images grew incrementally more erotic, until, in the final image, a wall-size canvas depicted the artist as Echo raping Narcissus (also herself) as (s)he sobbed. Her tears created a roiling sea, waves frothing with the brine of his fear and shame, and, in this sea she could see herself, and she could not remove her eyes from that sublime and terrible vision, herself, that tortured her as she rode herself unwillingly, tethered to her own black flame.

‡‡

The smudged plastic of an empty refrigerator shelf greeted Soto when he returned to Tripoli. An unidentified reddish stain, chili sauce, Soto thought, or spill-over from the previous week's pasta night—which had gotten, to a minor degree, out of hand. Other miscellaneous marks had also made themselves visible in the transparent surface. If Soto so chose, the polychromatisms could be interpreted into interlocking nation states, dukedoms and marches of ketchup and soy sauce, that bled into one another, unable to keep their borders intact. His stomach screamed out. He needed food.

Soto arrived at Liriope's Grocery after a fifteen minute drive. He was greeted by the crisp smell of frost mixed with geosmin from dirt and shrubs planted in between rows of the parking grid. Slumped lampposts gave off a tired yellow glow, that slowly diffused into the surrounding night, making the light appear blurry, almost pixelated. The pixilation gave Soto the uncomfortable sense that he was being filmed. He was onscreen. People were ogling as he walked to the grocery's automatic doors.

Soto did his best to be understanding, to be kind. Despite himself, he had internalized many of his father's ethical beliefs, and, though he resented his dad for the harshness of his hand, Soto also recognized, as an adult, that narcissism really was an unacknowledged decider in many people's lives. As brute as it may seem, many people only and exclusively acted out of self-interest. And, just as many others

acted in a manner that appeared ostensibly selfless, but was just disguised egotism. Of these people, there were two kinds: Those who actively deceived their intimates, and those who unconsciously deceived themselves. Soto recognized that, for much of his life, he had been a member of the latter category. Part of what had inspired in him such feelings of disgust with his first novel was the realization that he wrote *The Crown of Life* to self aggrandize, to protect himself, and not in fact to honor his father, or help any other person with their trauma, which struck him quite hard, as much of his self-worth at that particular point had been caught up in patting himself on the back for having written such an “evenhanded, large-hearted, empathetic novel.” Hopefully, after Elise left, he’d become better, but he didn’t really know. No, the best way would be to remain quiet, to listen to silence, and boredom, and the air all around.

Inside Liriope’s they were playing Kenny Rogers. It seemed to Soto as though Rogers’ voice, peaceful, vaguely Southern, emanated from the massed mounds of produce.

Soto cherished the forty or so minutes each week that were spent grocery shopping. There was a zen to it. A calm that came with the enactment of necessities. He had no reason to trick himself into complaining about shopping. It seemed impossible to be insincere about the need to eat. Soto had learned, gradually, to take an interest in his food. He came to appreciate his body as a sort of dynamo of combusive energy—channeling food into heat. He loved the chemistry of cuisine, the metamorphic element. What was hard became soft, what was dry became moist, what was powder became substance. Food was the physical embodiment of

metaphor, realizing the extension of any discrete object. An ingredient like flour—dry, white, tasteless—could become a moist, chocolate cake, and a convection oven could, in the right hands, work miracles that made the two fish and five loaves look childishly simple.

Soto coughed violently, shaking his entire body. He could directly identify the moment from which the cough originated. Even now, Soto didn't really understand what had happened, why Elise had left the way she did. He carried with him an immense guilt, which, in part, led him to grocery shopping, toward cultivating the habits that Elise most desired him to cultivate.

Grocery shopping became a means by which Soto asserted his own autonomy. It signaled that he was still functionally alive. He picked up baloney, cheese, and spicy mustard, and moved on to grab cereal, whole milk, jumbo eggs and bacon, and some whole grain bread. He wondered, briefly, if there existed a bread cabal that created the distinctions between twelve grain, wholegrain, multigrain, and whole wheat loaves. It struck Soto as being unnecessarily complicated—having to parse out the distinctions between all these varieties of bread, the impanated healthiness. Buying a loaf of bread should not be so difficult. In enshrining freedom, namely freedom of choice, it appeared to Soto that the U.S. citizenry had doomed themselves to a lifetime's worth of unnecessary thought—decisions regarding the size of eggs, the skimness of milk, the graininess of grains, the fat content of sour cream, the structural integrity of cheese, the marbling of meat, the caloric content of beverages—all this, combined with economic and ethical concerns, had left little brain-space for the bigger concerns, regarding loneliness, intimacy, human

connection, abuse both hidden and not. It was close to midnight. The lights buzzed overhead; the damp smell of quiet.

Soto advanced alongside his groceries to the checkout. The cashier was neither young nor old. She smiled tiredly. Through her skin, shiny and tight across her forehead, Soto could see a system of veins like forking tributaries. An ill-fitting red polo had the company logo scrawled obtrusively across its chest. Below one tight sleeve, an outline of a heart circumscribed a man's name, imprisoning it. The name was crossed out, an asterisk added below, with another name inked alongside it.

"How's your night," Soto asked.

"So-so," she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

On her chest there was a nametag that read, *Thisbe*.

"I like your name," Soto said.

"Thank you," she replied, brightening. "My parents named me after this Greek village. They're Greek, basically."

"And you're not?"

"Well, no, I am. But, they're... You know, they're really Greek. They speak the language. They love *Zorba*."

Soto laughed. "Right, right. I see."

"So, basically, in their eyes, I'm American."

"I know what you mean."

"So it be," she sighed.

"So this be, indeed."

They both chuckled.

"Thanks for the groceries," said Soto.

"Have a good night, now."

Soto ventured upon the sunless lot, plastic bags swishing creepily at his side. Liriope's automatic doors wooshed shut behind him. He piled the groceries in the backseat of his sedan, on top of the craggy brown paper remains of previous meals. There existed a sort of sediment to his automotive neglect. As he drove home, he felt an odd snatch of contentment, a hook pulling on his heart. Soto sighed. He listened to the hum of the car, and the rush of displaced air. The silence afforded him calm. Upon reaching home, he slept quite soundly, and did not dream at all.

‡‡

"So?" Nina asked, playing nervously with the corner of a piece of white computer paper. It was the top of a thick stack.

"It's ah... It's good," Soto replied. He stared down at the sheaf of paper in front of him, the twin of Nina's stack, spidered over with blue pen. No matter how many times he advised a student's project, he could never get used to telling someone else what to do or hazarding a guess at a fructifying direction.

"But a little I guess affectless. I understand that you're trying to demonstrate the character's isolation through her diction, how she's suppressing her emotions,

but we still have to feel them there beneath the surface... Not that I'm really any authority or anything."

When Soto was himself in college, completing a similar thesis project, his advisor was an old guard avant-gardist who had received a minor degree of acclaim for a series of novels published in the 70s. Soto thought back to the frustration that he experienced dealing with this man, a crotchety, self-involved, pseudo-academic old white man that had since become a kind of negative writer's caricature.

Nina pressed a thumb into her tattoo, leaving a white mark on her skin. "I guess," she said. "But you're the pro."

"I uh," Soto stuttered. "Okay. Here's the thing. You want to write about life, right? I assume this means your own?"

Nina nodded.

"So, I mean, is this type of writing reflective of your life? A sentence like, 'I felt his fingers pierce my skin like daggers,' is great, very evocative. But the thing is it's just it makes the protagonist into a sort of victim... Or, not this sentence in particular, but the aggregate. Which is a totally admirable thing to try to represent in fiction. But, you've got to give the protagonist some agency. It's just the only way for the story to retain momentum. You've got to find a way to balance it out."

Behind him, Soto hear the hiss of the café's imported espresso machine, which looked like a piece of space junk.

The carelessness with which Nina spoke was so put on, so self-consciously somber, that Soto couldn't help but find it endearing.

"The writing was good, though?" Nina asked.

“Very good,” Soto said. “Evocative. It’s tasteful... which is a hard thing to pull off. It’s not too... usually with student fiction the problem is that they overwrite, you know? They sort of conceal themselves with the language.”

In his peripheral vision, Soto caught the blurred image of another member of the writing faculty standing with her partner at the bar. Her aspect was distinctly avian. It seemed possible, to Soto, that she could have a bird’s hollow bones. She sashayed with terpsichorean grace to a nearby table, while her partner clomped behind. For a moment, he had the suspicion that she was looking over at him, ascertaining the capacity in which he was meeting this student. Soto silently cursed at Abner, then let the anger dissipate into a weary mist. Abner, he supposed, was not really the issue.

“I know what you mean. I guess... I don’t know how to say this without seeming rude, but... I’ve seen a lot of my classmates practicing a sort of muscular conceptualism? Like, bodybuilding with words, you know?”

Soto raised his eyebrows, which almost connected in the center of his forehead.

“Everyone is really into John Ashbury, Bernadette Mayer, Eileen Myles—the New York School basically—but mostly just the conceptual aspects, the poetry about nothing and stuff...”

Soto coughed. The air flayed his throat raw.

“Sorry... I don’t want to sound mean or anything...”

Soto hoped that his colleague, who had taken a seat at a table near his, had not heard Nina speak. She had studied with Myles while in school at CUNY,

attending the latter's informal poetry workshops, which she held in a studio apartment in the village. While Nina was not directly insulting Myles, Soto thought, his colleague was sensitive enough to perceive the comment as insult—a critique, maybe, of her teaching methods—and perhaps petty enough to hate a student on aesthetic principle.

“No, no...” said Soto. “You sound just fine. I understand what you mean.”

“So I’m sort of trying to write against that.”

“Well, I think you’re doing a good job so far. Just keep writing. That’s what’s important. Maybe don’t think about this conceptual stuff so much...”

“It just makes me a little angry...”

“I understand... Really, I do... It’s just that you want the story to be... as concrete as possible. What does your character want? I mean, concretely? And what do you want the story to accomplish?”

Nina laughed nervously, a quiet purling sound that stabbed at Soto’s memory.

“She wants to forget.”

“Okay, but, forget what? Make it more concrete.”

“Forget him.”

“The man?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. And, how does the character forget. What does she do?”

“I’m not sure yet. Still figuring it out.”

"That's no problem. No need to worry. You uh... you look worried. Just keep writing. You'll be fine."

"Thanks... Yeah I'm a little stressed."

"You're totally doing very well with this project. Just keep it up. Just keep on trucking..."

"Will do... I will truck along..."

"Great. I have one more question, which is what do you want this project to accomplish. Or, rather, how will the end of the project demonstrate a change from the beginning."

"..."

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to. No pressure."

"No it's okay. The protagonist changes a lot. She starts out really naïve and then becomes much, much less so as the project continues."

"Because of him?"

"Yes. And because of the institution's mishandling it, or, like, not being severe enough with the punishment."

"So It's sort of a bildungsroman...?"

"I uh... I suppose... yes? Yes. I guess it is..."

"And, I'm sorry to put it so tritely, but it's a tale of lost innocence?"

"It's about the difficulty of having to see yourself as an object, through another's eyes, as a body, or a shell."

"..."

"I'm sorry that was a little..."

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” Soto hoped his colleague wasn’t spying on their conversation. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, but kept his composure. A calm smile floated benignly amidst ripples of stubble. “Just keep going. That’s what’s important. As long as you write you’ll be just fine...”

There was a small pause. The silence had a bright, bell-like quality to it. Soto could feel the quiet resonance of ambient noise—the gentle murmur of his eardrums. A rude hiss from the espresso maker returned him to the moment.

‡‡

Soto could not remove Nina from his head. Whenever he allowed himself to stop thinking, she would appear across the blank monitor of his mind like a screensaver, meant to fill idling space. He attempted to avoid her, but could not. It was his job not to. He had to see her—the vicious malachite of her eyes, soft nose, well-shaped jaw. Thus far, he had fought to keep their conversations aggressively ordinary, about the writing only. He let their relationship live in those words, in what she wrote, and in what he had written before her. Even though he did not trust *The Crown of Life*, he understood the disappointment of the reader when faced with the dregs of the author. He did not want to disappoint Nina, cede control of their relationship.

The only perfection could be in words. The relationship of reader to author could only exist, in its untainted form, in the fiction itself. To bring that relationship into the world could only portend violence—an awkward transition from one medium to another. It could only be forced. Such force would hurt the fiction. If Nina were to succeed, then such a transition could not occur.

But, how could he guide her without acknowledging his own writing, his own internal life? This appeared impossible. He could only lead if he allowed himself to see in her all that he had once mistaken in himself. He had to establish the bond. For there to be no correlation between them, if he could not find it, then he would have failed as an advisor. He would not be able to lead by example. Somehow, he had to reach into the depths of her, to pull out the spirit, the talent, the words silently trembling. She was trapped within herself, he could tell. He was the same at her age.

He had done his best with Elise. She had been similarly trapped. He had attempted to release her, but could not. Of course he could not. She was not a child. Only she could break her own barriers. Nina, however, had searched him out, asked for his help. He could show her the way.

Soto paced about his living room, weaving in between stacks of books. He picked up one at random, *Lucky Jim*, which Elise had bought upon learning of his appointment at Beard. At the time she had seemed happy, but now Soto wondered if the gift were somehow a coded message. Perhaps Elise had been afraid that academic life would drain the human force out of him, as it had Amis' Jim. Perhaps she had been trying to warn him of the dangers of such a position. It was possible, he mused. Certainly, if Elise had said, outright, that she was afraid that he would

change, he would not have listened. It would have felt condescending, as though she were treating him like a child, who did not have the maturity to remain in control of his own identity.

By drawing out the past, parsing vague gesticulation into new meaning, Soto could feel Elise's presence anew. He could keep her with him. In a way, Soto had expected himself to be more of a man than he was, to be better able to adventure upon his future—to divorce past feeling from present flesh.

How many of these books were hers? She had left so many behind. Soto tried to separate them out, searching for the iridescent remains of a former life, definitively ended. Like an archeologist excavating a tomb, Soto examined the stacks for elements alien to his home. He could hardly bear the task. He didn't know what he would do when he finished. He couldn't get the books to Elise and he felt guilty throwing them away. He did not want to waste words.

He thought that perhaps Nina could make use of these books. But, the idea struck Soto as abhorrent. He wanted to keep Nina and Elise separate. He did not want the one to influence the other's fate. There was a possibility here, of redemption, of escape. He could see the brilliance in Nina, the purpose. It was the same as before: a soul, sharpened to a brittle point. Powerful and fragile. Violent and well-crafted.

Elise had been strong. She fought against the worst in herself. But, Soto could see the wear. He felt it. She had grown quick to anger. And, though he knew it wasn't her fault, he began to resent the changes that had occurred—the fighting, the sulking, the admonishment. He knew that she had broken herself, that she was

repairing, and that it was his job to keep out the ill of the world. He was the shield. He would reflect it away.

But, in the end he had failed. He was still unsure if he could have succeeded—if they could have made it through, the wound scabbed over, Elise restored to herself. Haunted by uncertainty, Soto opened a copy of D. H. Lawrence’s poetry, which had belonged to his former love:

A pool! Put off the soul you’ve got, oh lack

Your human self immortal; take the watery track.

‡‡

Narcissus stole Echo’s body. She only wanted his touch. She passed her days pining after his cruel love, until her flesh rotted, and her bones turned to dust. Her plea for love, strengthened by a desperate need for connection, carried on the wind, filled the empty spaces, warned of love’s risk.

It was in an attempt to abrogate this risk that the New York State Legislature passed the Enough is Enough Law to curb sexual assault on college campuses. The law established a uniform definition for consent to a sexual act: a declaration of assent, issued freely, soberly, with willing mind and body, eternally withdrawable, obvious and essential.

The law was written for the marginal cases, where the law is needed. To adjudicate the gray space where all is open to dispute. Some say yes, some say no. The first impulse is side with the victim. The victim needs support. The victim has been shown their own fragility. The ease with which person becomes simple object.

But, the law must be impartial, because it represents both victim and perpetrator—victim’s friends and perpetrator’s friends, victim’s parents and perpetrator’s parents, all four of whom (the parents) will keep their heads down in public, refuse to make eye contact, wishing that, like Echo, they could forgo their embodied selves.

It is to protect against this messy and confusing sadness that the Department of Education amended Title IX, establishing the sexual assault clause in 2011, designed to protect a student’s right to receive an education free from discrimination. It is to inform Soto of the specifics of this clause that occasioned Abner Eptazoes to invite the quiet man once again into his second floor office.

“Certainly, you understand the institution must protect itself?” Abner said, after he and Soto had exchanged pleasantries, and the latter had sat in the cream-colored armchair, cushions patterned with a baroque cross-stich.

“I’m still not quite sure why I’m here, unfortunately.”

“The institution has endured a bit of a lashing in the past half-decade or so. The recent rash of so-called campus assault... One media outlet in particular has published a few... let’s say ill-informed... pieces, all of which seem to be more intent on cultivating mass hysteria than the facts.”

Soto was aware of the pieces in question. First appearing on the front page of a reputable virtual periodical, the stories had spread quickly across the web, carried forth for the most part by young adult activists. He had not realized that all the editorials had originated with the same person.

“We’ve been a major target in this witch hunt. As your tutelary I would be remiss not inform you of the present situation—your relation with Ms. Montgomery.”

Anger pressed on Soto’s ribcage. He made sure to speak in fully formed sentences. “What relationship, exactly, Abner? Nina is my thesis student, as you already know.”

“I am only cautioning... informing... appraising you of the situation. We, of course, operate inside the parameters of Title IX. But, bizarrely, our code of conduct does not prohibit relationships between students and professors.

Soto frowned. “We don’t forbid student-teacher relationships?”

“Unfortunately not. As per the handbook: ‘The College strongly discourages amorous or sexual relationships between faculty members and students, administrators and students, and staff members and students. Although the College recognizes that adults, including young adults, may make choices regarding personal relationships, amorous or sexual relationships between students and faculty, administrators or staff raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest, validity of consent, and preferential treatment, jeopardizing a student’s educational program, as well as the learning environment for all students. These relationships may be less consensual than perceived by the individual whose position confers

power. The relationship also may be viewed in different ways by each of the parties, particularly in retrospect..."

"Abner, please..." Soto interrupted. He was somewhat intrigued. By the time Soto had reached college, affairs between the faculty and the student body were much rarer, and were spoken of only in hushed tones, like they were some sort of sacred, secret event of occult interest. Soto himself had never known anyone who had been involved in a campus affair, nor had he experienced one himself.

Abner continued, "Needless to say, we must be careful. The public's fear is nonpareil on this issue."

"I don't think you have much to worry about from me, Abner... I believe the uh last time we spoke you were concerned with my lack of romantic prospects."

"Quite true. I am now speaking for the institution. Not to you in particular in this regard."

"Right."

"I am fully convinced of your ethical strength. The institution is simply enacting caution, and the minatory duties fell to myself, as director."

"Hm..."

"Kevin?"

"Yes?"

"Our Professor Grandel, Maggie, as you know her, I suppose, saw you at Marty's a week ago—"

"That was a project meeting. Why is Maggie talking about this?"

"Maggie and I had a similar discussion to our own, during which she told me."

“ ... ”

“I do not wish to offend.”

“I’m not sure what to say...”

“I apologize for any unintentional discomfort that may have been caused. Not personally, of course, but culturally. I’m not accusing you of anything. Simple administrative procedure is all.

“Even were you to assume relations with Ms. Montgomery, that is not actionable, simply inadvisable. But it is up to your discretion, of course.”

“Thanks,” said Soto sarcastically.

“I’m sorry if this upsets you, Kevin.”

“No...” Soto trailed off. He tried to imagine Nina as a sexual being—or at least one whose sexuality could be directed towards him. He imagined furs, and lurid pink and blue lights, plush carpeting and an active fireplace, but did not think that he could inhabit this setting with his student’s presence. To his immense discomfort, he was wrong. Nina’s slim body shifted into place beneath a large bear pelt, her hands sliding slowly down the fur garment in a display of arousal. In a panic, Soto did all he could to expunge the image from his head. He thought of canned tuna, sardines, garbage, his grandmother Ethel, but nothing could dislodge Nina. Finally, in a final desperate attempt to wrest her from his brain, he mentally replaced Nina’s head with his own, a pastiche of persons, so that now it was his body in front of the fire, amber light mixing with pink and blue to form a kind of dusky orange.

‡‡

By around five PM, Soto's living room had been obscured by a shadowy fractal that jutted out over coffee table and overstuffed couch, where it engaged in a fierce battle with the blurry yellow light from the torchiere lamp in the corner nearest to the kitchen table where Soto had set his legal pad. Slightly dazed by the dark, he attempted to scrawl a few sentences, but each word he wrote made him feel frustrated and dissatisfied, so he soon stopped. Somewhere in his gut he felt a familiar sensation—a story trying to get out of him, caught in the snarl of his flesh. He was at a loss for words. He did not know what he felt, nor its best means of expression.

He could still smell Elise, the scent of rose petals and papyrus lingering. She had worn expensive perfume, he remembered. Rose of No Man's Land by Byredo. For a while, he had tried to remove the odor, spraying cans of pine-scented aerosol into the rectangle of space between his head and the ceiling. But, to Soto's great frustration, Elise's scent remained a resident of the apartment, a little ghost, a reminder of Elise's lingering presence in Soto's life. For some reason, on this day, the smell was particularly distracting. Each word Soto wrote made him more aware of the arid waft of florals, vaguely synthetic, hints of metal and plastic mixing with rose, like a hypothetical petal, preserved as a tincture, and distilled. He got up from the table and paced for a while, doing his best not to breathe. Eventually, Soto moved to his bedroom. He took a pair of sweaty socks out of his wicker hamper and

pressed them to his nose. The acridity of urea helped to clear his mind. In the mirror on the other side of the room, Soto saw himself, socks bunched in his hands, nose burrowed deep and rabbit-like into the fabric.

Soto experienced a desperate urge to masturbate. He craved the narcotizing bliss of an orgasm, the fleeting blankness that accompanies the moment of ejaculation. Slowly, furtively, he retreated to his bed. It was full-sized, covered by a white and blue striped duvet that he had bought a few years prior. The duvet made a slight crinkling sound underneath him. Placing his computer at his left side, Soto leaned back on a pillow, also striped blue and white, and attempted to make himself comfortable.

Over the years, Soto's taste in porn had become fairly extreme. He had become inured to pretty girls; the overacted orgasm. The variables were discomfoting. The averageness of the act itself was de-stimulating. For Soto, the porn needed to be dramatic. It needed myth. Grandiose unreality. That was the point. The fantasy of it. He needed control.

Thus, the porn that he enjoyed often involved humiliation; cuckolding; racial stereotypes; sexual organs of an abnormal size—organs the size of which almost necessitated one to embark upon the orgiastic occupation, given their relative inconvenience in all other spheres of life; BDSM; incest; and simulated assault. He was, most of the time, simultaneously in wonderment of his predilections, their relative radicality, and ashamed. The fantasy needed to be close to reality, uncomfortably close, for cathexis to be effective. Soto was unsure of his own

boundaries, or, rather, he was afraid that he was unsure of his own boundaries. He was perverse.

Interplay, Soto thought. Art's obsession with pain, death, cruelty, despair. Dostoevsky and Chris Burden, who allowed an assistant to shoot him in the arm from ten paces; who had his palms nailed to the hood of a yellow Volkswagen beetle so that he could assume the pose of Christ. Pain and danger as artistic expression—the divide between life and art blurred and confused. If one can imagine oneself into a piece of art, if, indeed, it is encouraged that one do so, then why should one not imagine the piece of art into oneself, or into the world. Why shouldn't art be actualized into life? As we seen in art ourselves, so we see in ourselves art, or artifice, fantasy, narcissism—the world impressed with our indelible stamp. So, thought Soto, perhaps violence, roughness, fucking, is meant to shred the ego, to allow us to break through the scrim of reality. To allow the fantasy to seep in. To implicate us in the act that occurs on the other side of liquid crystal.

Soto couldn't concentrate on the screen. Slowly, his penis shrank and softened, and he was left half-naked, panting shallowly. The duvet crinkled as he rose halfheartedly, exposing two small crescents of sweat that had deliquesced into the cotton fibers.

Soto had always had difficulty with sex. The connection that was required, being in the moment, coupling as a celebration of persons—Soto could only see another as clearly as he could see himself. He could only explain the world in terms of himself. And, it was this impulse to explain, to make rational and describable, that decimated his sex drive, and drove him to the blunt instrument of pornography.

He trudged back to his kitchen, toward the refrigerator, on top of which was set a large glass bottle of whiskey. After he had poured himself a glass (two fingers, hesitation, then a third) he sat back down at the table and attempted to write.

In the space of a few minutes, the whiskey was gone. Soto poured himself another few fingers and drained the glass. Then another few fingers. And another.

An idea began to form in his mind, even as it grew ever foggier from the alcohol. It became a dark silhouette, a shadow that by its very lack of detail became much greater, brilliant, and terrifying than it was.

If he had lost his ability to write perhaps what he needed, Soto ruminated, was... maybe... a partner? Or a night out... to remind him of what he used to like and do... to recharge.

Soto savored the off-kilter satisfaction of this line of thinking. He fiddled with his pen, letting it play over his hands. Eventually, he arose, grabbed a black topcoat, which Elise had bought him for his birthday, and swept out the front door.

◇◇◇ II ◇◇◇

I learned that the trees stood crooked and bare in the winter, sticking out at odd angles. I learned that at a certain hour light can have such clarity that it hurts. I learned that East Coast snow, with its wet and icy crunch, differed from the powdery Northwestern version with which I was familiar. I had returned, after two weeks home for break, to campus. This was the first winter I would spend away from home. My friends had told me that winter here wasn't the same as travelling to Washington for a week or two, staying in a lodge. I felt optimistic.

"You have to live in this, you realize," said Jackson.

"I do."

"Your socks get wet. Your nose is runny all the time. Your skin dries out."

"Not to mention it's really cold for like four months," Elise interjected.

We were in Jackson's room. An eighth of Evan Williams was between the three of us, half empty. We were preparing, in a manner that I now understand was more ritualistic than spontaneous, or enjoyable—we felt, as freshman, that it was our duty to take advantage still of the freedom that college offered—for a long walk across the campus, which unfurled, thin and thread-like along the Hudson river, to a party on south campus.

"There's no getting away," Jackson continued. "That's the thing. You have to live with it. There's no escape."

Elise frowned.

Jackson took another pull from the bottle. He passed it to me. “Just how it is, my pal.”

The dorm was on north campus. It had a gray roof that sloped steeply toward the building’s front. Instead of a front door, or lobby, the dormitory’s first floor was bisected by a concrete-floored breezeway, from which one could enter either side of the dorm. Two wings appended the main building, each of which had their own sloped roof, which made the dorm look as though it were composed out of multiple small living units somehow knit together.

I drank from the bottle, trying to seem playful and carefree. At the start of college I was a heavy drinker—narcotics mixing with natural excitement—and insouciance was more of a natural state.

It was intersession, the beginning of January. We were at school for a sort of sequel to our freshman orientation, which consisted of three weeks of curated readings from a black binder, and twice daily discussions with a group of fifteen randomly assigned others plus an instructor. This time, though, we were being made to suffer a simplistic tutorial on scientific procedure that had us in a lab for nine hours each day, while an instructor was paid to tell us facts that we already knew, and orchestrate experiments better done in an elementary school classroom.

Who had an ID that winter? A fake ID, an unreal mishmash of facts for an image tattooed in plastic. I have forgotten so much, blocked so much. It is hard to remember. I am attempting to recover these memories from my hopeful mind, excavating the relics as carefully as I can. But, even in excavation, much is broken,

much is lost. I cannot say for sure that what is there now was then. Or that what was not there never had been.

I think I remember Jackson's room—the coarse shag carpet, miniature refrigerator, travel hamper, little crumbs of food on every surface, drawers skewed open at odd angles. He had cleared the area between his bed and his roommate's for us to sit in a circle and drink. Jackson and his roommate, Scott, had at that point embarked upon a war of passive aggression that would last the remainder of the term. Scott wore bow ties and pastel chinos to class. He was exceptionally clean. Jackson, on the other hand, had long hair that he left purposely unwashed, and wore the same pants every single day until the crotch ripped out sometime in mid November. Scott folded his clothes, stacking them in neat piles before placing them in his dresser. He made his bed each morning, and spent some time each day organizing his desk. Jackson would throw his dirty clothes on the carpet, where they would remain for weeks. He ate constantly, although he never seemed to gain any weight, and was always covered in small bits of food, which he seemed to smear over any surface with which he made contact. Originally, the mess was kept localized to Jackson's dresser and bed, but slowly it spread outward, toward Scott's side of the room.

Scott had been mature enough to control his anger, but still harnessed it in petty, non-constructive ways. When Jackson's mess finally began to encroach upon his bed, slightly before the fall semester had ended, Scott took certain retaliatory measures. They consisted of a small pile of crumbs carefully constructed on top of the mauve expanse of Jackson's pillow, and a sticky note, posted immediately below

the pile, upon which, written in a lovely looping hand, were the words: *Please keep your mess to yourself. Thank you.*

So, now, Scott had all but vacated the room, returning only to sleep, and to enact various small revenges upon Jackson. As such, Jackson had begun modeling the room as his own. He had brought a small flat screen monitor back with him from break, which he installed, nail in drywall, above Scott's duvet, so that it faced his own. On the windowsill was a metal cylinder filled with marijuana, a white ceramic ash tray, an a pipe of blown glass that stacked up the shaft in various colors.

I took another gulp of the whiskey. Some of it dribbled down my cheek.

"Let's turn on the TV."

"No I really want to play cards," said Elise.

"I don't have cards," said Jackson, gesturing with the remote.

"I do," Elise replied. "In my room. I'll just go grab them."

"I could play cards. I think that'd be fun."

"Ok! I'll grab them!" Elise jumped to her feet and left, blonde hair like a sheet of lace floating behind her. I was jealous of her hair.

Jackson made a face at me, pretending to be hurt.

"I wanted to watch *The X-Files*," he said. "Scully is a babe."

"Too bad she loves Mulder."

"David Duchovny? After *Californication*? I don't think so."

"What does that mean?"

"He's like a sex addict, alcoholic and drug abuser. The trinity of frustrated love."

"Well someone does need to ease that frustration..."

"And who better than me?"

"You know, Jackson, I can't think of one person better suited to ease the frustration of FBI Agent Dana Scully than the strapping young man in front of me."

"..."

"What?"

"I'm blushing."

"Shut up."

"Really! That was *so* kind."

"Shut the fuck up."

"I can't believe you'd say something like that. And about me! Geez. I feel so lucky."

"You are the scum of the Earth."

"You are my muse."

"You are my own personal hell."

"That hurts."

"Deal, bitch."

Jackson awkwardly maneuvered himself on to one knee. His eyes were green with small flecks of gold in the iris. There was a long silence. I kept pulling from the bottle.

"I love you," he said.

"What...? What?"

"You've got a fat ass."

"Fuck you, dude," I said, and shoved him into a pile of dirty clothing.

"What? That's a compliment."

"I fucking love my ass," I said, indignant.

"I am not debating the quality of your ass my friend."

We heard the echo of footsteps in the hall, and the door open. Elise had returned with the cards. She had also changed her top, I noticed, and put on a small amount of make up.

I stood up, and turned. "Elise, what do you think about my ass?"

"I love it, babe."

"Thank you," I said, satisfied.

"I said I loved it," said Jackson. "I'm not sure how you interpret that as an insult..."

"You don't tell a girl you like her ass flat out like that if you mean it! That's weird..."

"So I am socially at fault?"

"Uh yeah."

"My *deepest* apologies." He bowed with mock seriousness.

"You can take your apologies and—"

"Let's play cards!" said Elise.

"—do uh... something... with them."

"Nice one."

"Shut up."

We sat down. Elise dealt out the cards, occasionally flipping one over by accident as she drew, which made her giggle so hard that Jackson had to take over the dealer's responsibilities.

Elise had developed a reputation around campus for being a sloppy drunk. I found this to be an unfair assessment. It would not have been made if she were a man. At least, not in the same way. Male drunkenness equated to emotional openness, and a propensity for violence. If a man were drunk, it would be the woman's responsibility to accommodate him. Drunkenness in men created hurricanes. The damage was considered unavoidable. The best course of action would always be to rebuild one's life after the ruin.

A drunk woman was considered stupid. Unable to control herself. The weakest of the pack. She was destined to be picked off by some predator. So, people judged Elise much harsher than they would have judged a man. The sloppiness reflected poorly on her character. Although, for Elise, inebriation was a means of honesty and expression, a certain type of living, acting, catharsis, it was seen as impeding her development as a woman. She was very pretty, and, I knew, very smart, so men assumed that her external appearance mirrored a similar internal perfection. That all was orderly and well with the state of her soul. But, she was afraid of herself, insecure, as confused and unhappy as anyone else. It was only when drunk that she felt comfortable expressing a modicum of emotion. She needed to cede control.

I, on the other hand, desired as much control over my surroundings as possible. Too often the world felt as though it were spinning off its axis, warping the

horizon line. Attendant to this desire for control was a fear that it would make me appear uptight or bitchy to my friends. So, without even realizing that I was doing it, I hid my desire, and did my best in high school, and through the first year or so of college, to present myself as though I did not care about the consequences of any action, as though such consequences would resolve themselves, and dedicated myself outwardly to having the most fun possible, while inwardly concerned with managing this phantom self that I had created, so as not to be found out for the paltry self that I, at that point in my life, considered myself to be.

I took another pull from the plastic cylinder of whiskey, which was about three quarters empty at this point.

“You know Gin Rummy?” asked Jackson.

“Rummy or Gin rummy?”

“There’s a difference?”

“Ya,” said Elise. “One you play for points and matching different groups of cards—”

“That’s the one I know.”

“Okay!” Elise thudded to the floor. A lunula of underboob peeked out from beneath her top.

“Let me grab you some water,” I said. “Uh...”

Jackson gently forced a red mug inscribed with the college’s logo into my half-raised hand.

“This?” he said.

“Uh right,” I mumbled, and left for the bathroom.

When the college was founded, back in the 1860s, by some renegade Episcopalian preacher, I suppose it had seemed like a good idea to make the college's seal a book wearing a variation of the imperial state crown. But, the symbolism struck me as a little on the nose for a liberal arts college. It seemed a little tasteless. A latin motto was printed inside the book: *EDUCATIO EST MAGNUM*. A classics major I knew told me that it meant "Education is great." But, she also said that the Latin verb, *educatio*, has a slightly different meaning from its English equivalent. In Latin, education refers to the breeding of a child. To the act of instilling social, rather than intellectual, knowledge.

When I returned to the room, arm wet and horripilated, Jackson was knelt on the floor listening to Elise as she talked about setting him up with her roommate.

"And you're so her type. Like artsy and like bony. Oh my god she loves that. That guy in *Fear and Loathing*?"

"Hunter S. Thompson?"

"No the actor stupid."

"Ooooooh you mean Benicio del Toro?"

"NO!"

"So then who?"

"The other guy!"

"Dr. Gonzo?"

I knelt down next to Elise, and carefully transferred the mug from my hand to hers. "Here's the water babe. Drink up."

“Thank ya thank ya,” she said, before tilting her head up forty-five degrees, and slurping at the cup.

“We should probably get going soon,” said Jackson.

“Dude give it a little.”

Elise slurping.

“I know I know.”

“*X-Files?*”

“Hell yeah.”

I know many of my male peers wouldn't be able to bear the image of Elise sucking at a mug of water. It would embarrass them; they would feel embarrassed for her, as though she had somehow forfeited status, had involuntarily become imperfect, no longer able to float above petty indiscretions. I loved these moments. They reminded me of a time in high school, when my friends and I read *Cosmo*, laughing at its depiction of the ‘ideal woman,’ and its stereotyped notions of sexual practice. Take, for instance, a listicle titled *10 Tips for a Blowjob that Will Have Your Partner Literally Sobbing With Pleasure*. The first tip was to suck on an altoid while blowing “your man,” to give him a “tingly, minty surprise.” Another was to “go coast-to-coast—lick from balls to the tip of his penis like an ice cream cone.” My friends and I mocked the tone of the piece—self-consciously conspiratorial, yet out of touch. But, I know that I did, at least once, try to suck on a partner's cock while an altoid was resident in my mouth. And, I have more than once gone “coast-to-coast” on a dick, though I am still made uncomfortable by the implied metaphor that a penis is the USA for the Cosmopolitan Woman, and that the totality of our existence laid

between scrotum and glans. My friends and I were sophisticated women, bravely facing a sexist world as avatars of a critical feminism. That was how we presented ourselves. But, we loved and hurt in ways that theory and vision could not adequately explain. We were caught child-like, unsure, unenlightened. And, I, at least, was embarrassed. I kept that *Cosmo* article at the bottom of an old wooden chest that I inherited from my grandmother, as a sort of secret talisman of sexual confidence, a talisman that I have never shown to a single person. So, when I saw Elise drunk, awkward, released, I remembered that I was not alone in my secret life, my real life, but that we were all similarly constrained in a mode of life continually unacknowledged.

On screen Mulder proselytized about aliens and government conspiracies, while Scully stood at his side, wearily bemused.

“More water, please.”

“No problem.”

“Elise, you ready to go?”

“Pass me my coat, please.”

I poured the remaining whiskey into a plastic Nalgene, and took a long sip. Elise motioned for the bottle.

“I don’t think so babe.”

“Please?”

“I’ll grab you some water on the way out.”

“Ooook.”

We left the dorm with the Nalgene, and another empty plastic bottle that I filled with tapwater from the bathroom.

“Hydrate,” I said, giving it to Elise.

Elise stuck out her tongue at me, then laughed loudly. “I do what I want,” she said.

“Well, I hope you want to drink water...” I winced.

“You sound like my mom.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with that,” said Jackson. “It shows responsibility.”

“I don’t want to be a mom!”

“Personally, I think we could all use a little more mom-desire. This whole Manic Pixie Dream Girl thing?—extremely played out. If I see another girl with bangs and bleached blonde hair I think I will probably yak right on her what like Doc Martens or Bluntstones or whatever.”

“So, is this why you don’t get laid? You just named virtually every girl we know.”

“I just need a mom, dude.”

“This whole Oedipal fixation thing is really creeping me out.”

“*Que sera sera*, babes.”

“Also, you described me...” I said.

“You’re not wearing Doc Martens.”

“Veeery good point. I am no longer at all offended.”

“Sorry... I was just kidding, you know.”

“Gotcha, bitch.”

“Fuck you.”

“Jesus Christ it’s cold.”

“East Coast, baby. Got to love it.”

Globular bulbs of light floated along the path to South Campus. Thin rings of color extended onto and over the path as we walked, an effect, I had learned, called halation, where the eye projects illusory color as a product of extreme change in brightness. As we neared the river, I found myself staring at the area of sky where this artificial brightness met the dark. The comingling of these extremes led to an optical perception of flatness, as though the sky were a thin purple sheet hung over the mountains.

We continued to walk. The glow diminished in intensity. Stars peeked through the blackness, tiny pinpricks of light. The moon’s pale wash turned the landscape to coruscating unreality.

Attached to each lamppost was a red and white flag that displayed the seal of the college. (*EDUCATIO EST MAGNUM. EDUCATIO EST MAGNUM. EDUCATIO EST MAGNUM.*) Frost coated the red canvas, freezing the flags in a variety of gnarled shapes. I had never, at that point in my life, experienced this type of cold. It made everything seem still and quiet—a constant, invisible assault. My knuckles ached, my ears went numb, my lips split and bled. I breathed, and a spume of water vapor appeared in the air in front of me.

The party itself was in a small white cinderblock dorm that housed not more than six underclassmen. It was located at the bottom left corner of the South Quad, making it the dorm furthest away from where I currently lived. Honey House was

one of eleven separate residence halls in this area, each of which was named after a particular alumnus of the college. Colloquially we referred to this group of dorms as “the toasters,” because their squat, square bodies and gently arching roofs gave one the impression that a piece of toast could pop out of the roof at any given moment.

In front of Honey House was a crowd of students, bunched together, smoking. Jackson separated from us, walking up to a tall boy in a black hoodie.

“What’s good? Could I bum one?”

The boy pulled a light blue box from the pocket in his hoodie.

“I’ll see you in there,” Jackson said to us.

I took another pull of whiskey, and wormed my way in through the crowd. Elise trailed behind me. The kitchen was packed wall to wall with bodies. Early 2000s Hip hop played from the living room, where a dance floor had been established.

We took off our coats, and busied ourselves finishing the whiskey and water. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a boy that I had fucked during orientation dancing with his now-girlfriend. They bobbed awkwardly back and forth, reminding me of the night that him and I had spent in his twin bed as he convulsed on top of me. A very shy, cute boy, the whole time we were together he seemed so uncomfortable that I had almost felt sorry for him, and gave him every chance to back out of the situation.

I grasped Elise’s hand. We moved to an open space near one of the speakers. The music was so loud that it shook the floor. I felt the percussion of displaced air on my skin and let my head loll back. Elise’s hands were on my hips. Her fingers

caressed my hipbone. Her body produced an overwhelming heat. I moved her hands to my shoulders, and slowly ran them over my body, feeling its smoothness.

The last thing I remember was feeling of my own body, and the fleeting desire for my own sexual presence.

‡‡

I did not tell anyone. Neither did he, as far as I can tell. My body felt shattered. My arm was not my arm. My leg was not my leg. I clenched and unclenched my hands. They were still there. They still worked. The muscles were sore. My stomach hurt.

I did my best to block the night out of my mind. I did my best to forget. But, I could not eat, and I could not sleep. The moment I closed my eyes I saw the horror on his face, the acknowledgement, the shame, and I would get sick with rage, then ashamed at myself, then angry for being ashamed. It was not my fault. I had done nothing wrong.

The anger enveloped me, dissolved through my skin, left me wrung out and exhausted. I ceased to feel anything at all, and just laid in my bed, staring at stripes of moonlight on my ceiling. I was too tired to cry. A vague sadness floated above my stomach's acid pool. I wanted to lose consciousness, to flatten and disappear into the blandness of a dream. But, my thoughts would not stop chattering. Even though I did

not think it was right, I hated myself. I had lost control. The act was not my responsibility, but I could only blame myself for the circumstances that led to its occurrence—for my naiveté and idiocy.

It was fairly easy to avoid one another. His orientation class was in a building far away from my own. The cafeteria closest to his building was farthest from my own. I could not think of a reason he would need to come to central campus.

Anxiety kneaded at my chest. Sluggishly a misshapen hole formed in my middle. I became accustomed to peeking surreptitiously around corners on my way to and from classes. My eyes established a newly familiar relation with the ground.

What did I talk about that week? Most of my conversations with Elise focused on a boy that she met at the party. He and I had a class together the previous semester. To me, he seemed like a perfect specimen of artsy college boy: dangerously thin; high cheekbones; paint-splattered pants; holes in most of his clothing; soft blue irises; a few wispy hairs at the chin that did not betoken any further flourishing.

“I was just dancing,” said Elise. “And he was dancing next to me. I saw kind of that he kept looking over at me and I tried to catch his eye, but every time I looked at him he would look away. So, I was just like fuck this and decided to just dance and not care. But then after a little bit of me dancing alone and being a little pissed off he sort of just appeared in front of me. He was so tall and he was just looking at me and we were dancing and his eyes were so blue, but he wouldn’t touch me. Then finally his arm came out and he laid it so lightly on my hip and I pulled him toward me.”

We were on our way to the library, walking along one of the college's many tarmac paths. On every side of us were people that we vaguely knew—from the previous semester, assorted parties, classes—who, even though I kept my eyes on the ground, I could feel assessing us, weighing our merits—hair, skin, makeup, clothing, character, intelligence, taste—trying to decide whether we were worth fucking, touching, talking to.

"Sounds nice," I sneered.

"Stop." A black note sounded in her voice.

"I'm just sick of hearing you talk about this boy."

Elise forced out a brittle laugh.

"What do you even like about him?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you. This is fucked up that you're doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Getting mad at me! You're upset but you won't tell me why and I've let it go because clearly you need your time. But don't take it out on me ok all don't get fucking angry at me for being happy..."

"I'm not getting mad at you! I just don't like this guy very much."

"This is fucking ridicu—"

Elise broke off midsentence. I had begun weeping. Shame filled my body with soft, poisonous warmth. Elise wrapped her arms around me. She led me to a quiet corner in an administrative building near the library.

"Please," she said. "Please... Tell me what's wrong..."

All I could do, in between convulsions, was shake my head.

“Please...”

I could hear the helplessness in Elise’s voice, the fear. I had made her afraid for me. I had caused the muscles in her body to tense, her brain to zap messages to her neurons. The body shifting toward fear and flight.

“Please...” Elise began to rock me back and forth, as though I were a sobbing infant that she simply had to remain with through a bad mood.

That night, Elise slept with me in my bed. She had worn her favorite pair of pajamas, which were fleece, and had smiling cartoon bees patterned all over. My sheets smelled like stale sweat and yeast, she had said, and ordered me to change them. I was grateful for her direction, and together we stretched the periwinkle cloth, patterned with mock waves, over the corners of my mattress. Then, we climbed into bed and watched *Friends*. Her hand reached over and clasped mine, which was damp with sweat.

“It’s ok,” she said. “It’s all going to be ok.”

She expected me to cheer up—her face was glowing. But, hearing those words, I turned my back to her and lay still until I was too tired to punish myself any longer.

‡‡

Elise tried to hide it from me, but I could easily tell. Her pupils had become ragged, blurring into the iris. Her voice strained against its syllables. Each word she spoke avoided what was right in front of her. She suggested that I begin to see one of the therapists that the school kept on retainer.

While I was hesitant to accede to Elise's request, being somewhat skeptical of the mode of confessional analysis upon which therapy purportedly succeeds, I could see the weight that I had placed on her, and I could tell that the emotional strain had begun to negatively effect our friendship, so I agreed, tentatively, to a consultation.

In the room where my consultation took place were two overstuffed navy armchairs, and a number of framed baby pictures. In one chair sat an older woman, who was wearing a white wool cardigan.

"Hi," she said, extending a hand made unreal by the combination of raised veins, sagging skin, and liver spots. A hand difficult to intuit onto one's own body. "I'm Madge."

We talked for the better part of an hour. Madge told me about her childhood. Her father worked as a journalist, reviewing restaurants in the greater Hartford area. Her mother was a chef at an Italian restaurant. Madge used to travel up to Rhode Island with her friends to surf, lying to her parents about school field trips and sleep overs. She saved up enough money to buy a shitty board in Newport, and hid it in her friend's basement.

Madge looked at me, hiding her expectation. Did she expect penance, or an act of faith? I could feel her hands rummaging around inside me, fumbling with my memories like old heirlooms kept in an attic box. The inquisitorial nature of therapy

frightened me. I did not want to give myself up. I did not want an auto-de-fe, to demonstrate my penance in words, as though public expression of private events could wash me clean of the horror. That was too simple. Childish and naïve. The openness of Madge's speech was intended to torture me, to reveal my state of spiritual occlusion, my lack of faith. It illuminated my problem—that I could not state, in simple terms, why I was here, who I was, what had hurt me. In her attempt to lend me the intimacy of her own life, she meant to construct the dock by which I was meant to leap into the gray pool of my own feelings. But, I could not glimpse the pool's bottom, and I feared it to be bottomless. I was afraid that I would drown within myself. That I could never recover from such a dive. Yet, I felt the pressure growing. Upon this dock I could sense an umbral evil behind my slightly bent back. I needed to jump. I needed to. Or else I would be devoured.

At the end of the hour, we arranged to see each other again, a week from Friday.

††

When I entered my sociology class, Gender and Deviance, he was already there. His long brown hair was pressed against the back of a slatted wooden chair. He craned his head around and looked back, pretending as though he hadn't seen me. I

thought: shouldn't I have known he would be here? Wouldn't we have talked about this previously?

I remember letting my bangs fall just so over my face so that it seemed like I didn't have a face at all.

There was the normal chattering of voices, each word blending into the next, each syllable blurring slightly at the edges. I was not paying attention to anything. I was waiting, in fearful anticipation, for the sound of his voice. My foot had begun to play with a small loop in the fabric of the floor's carpet, pulling it apart, until it folded down into singular wisps of wool blend. The teacher called on him. I prepared myself, as best I could, to hear his voice.

"I think that to follow someone like Gayle Rubin," he said, "acceptable sexual practice within any social group is determined by that group, thus advocating for a non-essentialist framework, so that what we must understand is not how sex actually occurs within society, so much as how we decide upon what constitutes like morally good and bad sex, I guess..."

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to fall out of my chair laughing, and to continue laughing on the floor until someone decided that I was laughing too much and was being made uncomfortable, and then I would continue laughing until maybe the teacher called an ambulance and rushed with me to the hospital where I would continue laughing until visiting hours were over and the teacher would go home and only then once I was completely alone would I stop, and begin to cry. And, he would know, while I laughed, that I knew him, that I knew what he had done, and that he was a fraud, and a coward, and a terror.

“That’s a good point,” said the teacher. She wrote “Gayle Rubin” in yellow chalk on the blackboard. I could see two chords of muscle straining under the skin of her neck. She atypically tall, almost six feet, and thin. Her hair was tightly curled, corkscrewing in all directions. It shook a little when she spoke.

“For those of us who don’t know, Gayle Rubin is a theorist of sex and gender who teaches at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Her essay, ‘Thinking Sex,’ will be important to us as we further our investigation into the relationship between gender and deviance. It gives us a metric that will let us begin to talk about how societies determine the relationship between typical and atypical sexual practice, that is to say statistical concerns, and what that society decides are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sexual practices. I think we’re reading it week three. A well brought up point.”

A boy on the other side of the table raised his hand. A boil of some sort, lumpen and off-color, a malignant purple, bobbed slowly on his forehead.

The professor nodded.

“It’s crazy to think that like during the Victorian era any kind of masturbatory practice at all was considered mentally deviant. What’s so strange about this is the like generality of the law. Like the fact that having sex with someone underage is the same in the eyes of the law as assault. I think this presents a huge problem for us. How does the law allow us to distinguish between legally deviant and legally acceptable behavior? Or like what is the law’s place in distinguishing this?”

“That’s a great question. It’s something we’ll delve into quite deeply as the semester progresses, especially during the second half, when we begin to discuss Title IX and the way that sexual assault is legislated. For now, however, I have a

hand out. It's the text to what is called the 'Dear Colleague' letter that the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Office issued in 2011. Think how recent that was. 2011. It details institutions of higher education's responsibility to handle cases of sexual assault. Let's take a look."

From the seat of a chair at the head of the table, the professor picked up a stack of white paper, halved it, and passed each half to student at either side of the table, who passed it to an adjacent student. Eventually, we all recieved the letter, which was in reality a heavily footnoted memo.

"If you could read the first paragraph."

"Sure thing. 'Education has long been recognized as the great equalizer in America. The U.S. Department of Education and its Office for Civil Rights (OCR) believe that providing all students with an educational environment free from discrimination is extremely important. The sexual harassment of students, including sexual violence, interferes with students' right to receive an education free from discrimination and, in the case of sexual violence, is a crime.'"

"Thank you," said the professor. "What do we have here?"

He raised his hand, but the professor instead motioned toward a girl with a septum piercing, and the side of her head shaved.

"It's interesting to see that this letter starts by talking about how education is the 'great equalizer' in America, when, I mean, it's not. It's predominately white, middle and upper middle class people going to college. The system skews that way easily. And like if women are still making around seventy cents on the dollar, and the point of college is to go out and get a good job and have a good life, then how

does college really help a lot of these women? If college isn't racially, class-ly, or gender-ly equal, how is it equal at all? What makes it an equalizer?"

The teacher pointed to him.

"I mean, I understand your point about these sorts of institutional skews. They're real. But, it seems like this letter is addressing a kind of ideal of American education that is based upon a conception of public education as arising out of representative democracy. It's like what Webster talks about with American education being by and for the American people. The equality is present because it is constantly self-generated, or failing to be generated."

"But," said another student. "It is failing to be generated. So, why is that? I don't think anyone here thinks equality is stupid or anything. Are the mass of citizens here just evil? Self-possessed? Can't see past themselves?"

"That's a great question," said the professor. "And we'll spend much of this term grappling with just that problem. In our supposedly good, enlightened society how do such inequalities become the norm?"

‡‡

The journal itself was innocuous—black, faux-leather, with a woven lycra strap. The interior pages were slightly rounded, as though someone had sanded off their corners. They were also unlined, so that, if I so pleased, I could write diagonally

or vertically across them. These blank pages lent me a feeling of vertiginous freedom, which contributed to my sense of unrestricted confessional ability.

I wrote down small daily observations, little treasures of a certain hour—the way light caught the twist of rising steam off dining hall pot roast, or the smile of a stranger with whom I made accidental eye contact.

My favorite part of the day became the fifteen minutes, right before I tried to fall asleep, something with which I was still having problems, where I would page back through my journal, and recover pieces of myself, valuable experiences, that I had forgotten—something substantive to remind me of the fragile progresses and joys of the everyday.

I began to retreat, more and more, into my written life. It provided me guiltless emotional support, and allowed me to remove more of the burden from Elise. She had recently been made upset, and I did not want to stress her any more than was necessary. The boy she had been seeing, one day, stopped responding to her texts. She hadn't the nerve to call—she didn't want to seem clingy—so she spent her days in a state of growing agitation, blaming herself for whatever it was that had occurred.

"It's not your fault," I told her, as we sipped coffee from ceramic mugs taken from our school's dining hall. Elise's foot jiggled against the side of my bed. Little beads of coffee slopped down the side of her mug.

"Boys are assholes."

"Especially here," I said. "I don't know what it is."

“We were getting along so well. I just want to know what happened. That’s all...”

“Fuck him. You’re a babe. You’re better off without him.”

“There was this one time where like he was drunk and couldn’t get hard and I was like whatever it happens—”

“Right. Of course.”

“—But he got really pissed off and it was like come on its not a big deal chill a little like I’m not thinking you’re any less of a man but he was like so *pissed...*”

“That’s really shitty.”

“Fuck him.”

“Fuck *him*.”

But, I could relate. He felt no need to explain himself to Elise. He wanted to keep his feelings private. Despite myself, I sympathized. It was easier to keep some things secret, to entomb them in memory, or written upon a page. I felt a kinship with this boy, a bond developed in mutual silence, a pact of non-expression. To my immense guilt, I felt closer to him than I did to Elise, as though he somehow could, through his omission, intuit my own—our collective silences connecting and comingling in some unconscious realm. For the first time in almost two months, I felt my body de-tense, my limbs turn limp, until the horror returned, the vision of eyes and peaked lips, and the moment was gone.

I could feel my mouth jerk involuntarily open, tears wend down my cheek and jaw. Elise twined herself around me. I had failed to keep this from her. I could not see her face, but I could feel the flat and dark horizon of her retreat.

“Tell me. Please tell me.”

Guilt hammered through me. My organs compressed and expanded, faster and faster, until finally left me hollow, unable to move. This was my fault.

“Just... Please... You can’t keep doing this. It’s hurting both of us. Please...”

‡‡

Elise accompanied me to a small white house on campus. The building was slope-roofed, slat-covered, and altogether unassuming. It had been built the year before our arrival. There were no dorms near the building. No one saw us enter.

The Title IX coordinator’s office was on the second floor. We walked up the stairs, our shoes sinking silently into gray carpet, the ambient thrum of radiator somewhere in the background. At the end of a hallway stood a smooth wooden door, upon which a piece of paper had been taped that read: TITLE IX COORDINATOR.

Opening the door, we saw a cheap wooden desk and two office chairs with ugly and uncomfortable cushions sewn into their frames. Behind the desk was a student whom I had often seen in the library, but did not know. Elise grasped my arm tightly. I felt her nails pressing softly through the cotton of my shirt.

“Hi,” the student said sweetly. “Are you here to see Ellen?”

I nodded yes.

“Okay,” the student responded, bobbing her head. “Great. I’ve just got a couple of forms that you should fill out before going in. If that’s okay?”

“Okay,” I murmured.

“Also, there’s a reading room over there with a lot of great literature some of which may pique your interest. Feel free to use it as a resource o?”

Elise and I went to the reading room. It was small, with white painted brick walls and a cupolated ceiling the apex of which transformed to glass so that a small amount of daylight filtered in. The light illuminated a paltry assortment of plywood shelves upon which the office had stacked memoirs and self-help guides related to assault and inequality.

I picked up a book titled *The Courage to Heal*. The first sentence read: “If you have been sexually abused, you are not alone.” Anger flared in me. Of course I wasn’t alone. Corrupt sensuality was a virus, an infection, a sickness of action and *eros*.

As I read on, I learned that the text’s audience were survivors of childhood sexual abuse. In my estimation, these people, or women had experienced something much, much worse than I had. My parents were kind people—a librarian and a surgeon. They picnicked on Saturdays, and sent me presents for Valentine’s Day. Their gifts were often handmade, carefully curated, artifacts of conscious care. From them I had never received anything more or less than the gentle gesticulations of familial love. This realization made me feel not happier, but lighter as though my body had become, suddenly, less of a burden.

I read another line: “The fact that someone else has suffered from abuse more severe than your own does not lessen your suffering. Comparisons of pain are simply not useful.”

To my mind, this contradicted the first sentence. If we were not alone, then how could we not compare our sufferings? Why shouldn’t we? We are, of course, imprisoned within corporeal bodies, from which the suffering arose to each of us, individually. But, we all have the same type of body, and the same type of mind. Why should we avoid that fact? Why not take advantage of our similarities to share pain, form a united front, and emerge as a stronger mass, a body politic of the female form.

The assistant poked her head, birdlike, into the reading room.

“Ellen’s back,” she said.

I raised my eyebrows, and turned to Elise. She shrugged her shoulders. Neither of us had heard the Title IX coordinator return from wherever she had been—at lunch, maybe, or a meeting? Hurriedly I filled out the paper work, which was an agreement communicating that whatever I told the Title IX coordinator at this point was private. Perhaps confessing would be easier, now, though I had become convinced not to speak with any degree of specificity.

I dropped the agreement with the assistant and entered Ellen’s office.

The coordinator sat at a desk, which was covered by a shawl of beads. The shawl was patterned yellow and blue in a manner that struck me as indigenous to some part of Mexico. Some clay fired knick-knacks stood upon it—pale blue oxen on stumpy feet; warriors that had misshapen holes for faces; Serpents with scales

impressed upon their skin—as well as a framed picture of a boy clad in gown and mortarboard, and a lamp decorated over with sand, seashells, and Elmer's glue.

The coordinator was frowning. Her cropped hair had begun to gray. It was thick and stuck out at odd angles, conveying a kind of enlightened artlessness. Her face was beautiful, and wrinkled. It appeared to me that she was beautiful only in proportion to her wrinkles, as though when she were young her face had been loose and pouchy, waiting to age into itself.

Elise and I sat in two hardwood chairs, to which a tasseled pillow each had been added. She stretched her hand over the desk. Three beaten silver bangles, curved and overlarge, jangled on her forearm. We shook, and she introduced herself. Looped around one of her fingers was a plain golden band, shot through with veins of silver.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

I told her, more or less, what had happened to me, avoiding the specifics. While I spoke, Elise held my hand.

When I had finished, the coordinator steeped her hands, and leaned heavily upon her desk. After a long silence, she asked, “What do you want to do?”

“I don't know.”

“There are all sorts of resources that you have at your disposal. I am one of them, but there are others. Student counselors, the Office of Human Resources, your dean, counseling and health services, Student Life. I just want you to know that. These are all here for you.”

“Thank you.”

“And, they all have to keep what you tell them from other students and more general faculty members. Anything you say will be completely confidential.”

“So I should probably talk to a couple faculty members or something, if I want?”

“Yes, to gain some structure.”

I wasn't sure that structure was what I wanted. Structure implied a network, people, the spread of information. It denoted a static, unchanging state of affairs. What I wanted was to disintegrate, to view the objects of my perception slowly blur into one another, until distance, separation, difference were no longer able to be observed.

“You need a network of people, professionals, who are able to support you through difficult emotional situations. So that you don't have to go through all this alone.” She looked directly into my eyes. Her pupils were gray, professionally cold. You're not alone, I hope you know.”

‡‡

Madge held me. Her sweater was warm and scratchy. Turquoise occupied the entirety of my field of vision. I could feel her hair bunching on top of my head, soft, loosely curled. A band of cold metal pressed upon my ear. A hand ascended and descended my back, producing an effect akin to hypnosis.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so, so sorry."

I felt my chest tighten. She smelled like mothballs and ripe fruit. Part of the smell was chemical, part naturally occurring. Even though I had told Madge, I felt as though nothing had changed. I could still feel a sickness within me, a hard stone in the pit of my stomach, my lungs slowly twisting together. I wanted him gone, disintegrating into memory. But, I could not drive him out. I did not want to reopen my own wounds, so recently scabbed over. Madge held me as a trembled. She stroked my hair. I took a deep breath and inhaled the deadness of her sweater. I felt the roughness of her old skin. I would soon be gone. There was nothing. Nothing.

††

Madge and I sat in silence, listening to the clock tick. Madge wore capris that showed her ankles. They were a mottled white and red, condensed by her socks, which pinched flesh against skin, like a sausage casing. Above her desk hung a framed picture of her son. He worked as a bank clerk on the West Coast. Madge had told me how it saddened her that she could not immediately comfort him if something happened. Parenthood, here, was simply a re-realization of childhood, a mirror or mandala of forgotten innocence.

"I have to... I have to... file a report..." she said.

"What report?"

“A Title IX report. There’s going to be an investigation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry. It’s stated in the college’s Student Safety Guidelines that: ‘The College has an independent obligation to investigate potential misconduct, even if a complainant does not want to initiate an official process. Therefore, absolute confidentiality cannot be promised with respect to a complaint of discrimination, harassment, gender-based misconduct or retaliation, when reported to institutional offices outside of the Counseling Center, Health Center, or Chaplaincy.’ But, at the same time, policy has decided that if there is a threat to overall student safety than ‘absolute confidentiality,’ only means confidentiality of identity, not confidentiality of information.”

“ ... ”

“That college has a mandate to investigate cases of sexual assault, which it takes extremely seriously. I am an employee of the college. I have to file a report or I could lose my job.”

“I don’t...”

“I’m so sorry. But, just know that your identity will be protected. No other students will be brought into this except for him and you. And, you will never need to speak to him or meet with him. The college will handle everything independently. I want to assure you that we will proceed with the utmost care.”

“I don’t want this.”

“I’m sorry, but my hands are tied. Assault is a chronic behavior. Others are potentially put at risk by this student’s continued presence on campus. I know this is

uncomfortable, but this is for your own safety, as well as the safety of the student body as a whole.”

“It’s just... I mean... What if it were a boy coming to you? There’s no way the same steps would be taken.”

“This is about safety. Physical harm. It doesn’t matter. Perhaps it will help to know that Title IX requires less of a burden of proof than a formal court of law. We just have to determine whether it was likely that something occurred—”

“Something...”

“...”

“...”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“All I mean is that less has to be proven, therefore the investigation will be less invasive that you may be expecting.”

“I think any amount of investigation is invasive.”

I’m so sorry.” Madge stood up, and moved in to give me a hug. Involuntarily, I shrunk into my chair. Guilt transformed her face into a gnarled ball. I couldn’t stand the expression for more than a few seconds, so I stood up myself, and took Madge into my arms.

‡‡

A few days later, I received a letter in the campus mail. I ripped it open. A piece of computer paper, folded into thirds, slipped into my hand. It was oddly innocuous, just a blank bit of paper. It could've been any piece of copy paper, chosen at random from an office stack. For whatever reason, I had imagined the official notification would be printed on card stock—creamy, thick, somehow reassuring. Instead, I received a mix of bleach, wood pulp, and acid, striated by the inky ghost of a malfunctioning printer, forced into an envelope. I didn't feel ready to read it, and stuffed the paper into my backpack.

A constant topic of conversation, between Elise and I, between anyone here, really, was the deficiencies of dating life at the college. Everyone wanted everyone else to be straightforward, to act with love and kindness, to say what one really wanted. But, after every weekday talk there followed a weekend party, all of us crowded into the kitchen of some anonymous house off campus, attempting, with unshackled hearts, to make eye contact with an attractive boy whose name we did or did not know, willing him to move closer to us, to somehow intuit our attraction, hoping that there was a mutual connection that transcended whatever particular circumstances in which we found ourselves—an eternal return of drunkenness and disillusion. But, inevitably, we ended up in bed with some patchy-bearded, brown-eyed child who, more often than not, had not showered that day, and whose mouth tasted like light beer, dick like unwashed skin, trying to please him, then feeling inadequate because we could not. His neglect of our needs simply enflamed them, until we became a wildfire dependent on his neglect, and we burned and burned

until he broke it off with us, because we had, in his words, become too “needy,” and he could no longer spare his energy on us, because of school, because of work, because of emotional states.

I attempted to sleep, doing my best to ignore the dark clouds of anxiety that had begun swirling in my head. I turned over, and turned over again. My desk was a storm of paper and beauty products. Books were stacked high upon my dresser, sheet music out in piles on the floor. Occasionally, I would kick a pile by accident, sending xeroxed paper flying all over. A towel bedecked the door, slumped over metal hangings. Nailed to one wall was a full length mirror, upon which I had written the final seven lines of Ted Hughes’ *Narcissus*:

*He melted—consumed
By his love.
Like Echo's the petal of his beauty
Faded, shrivelled, fell
He disappeared from his own eyes.
Till nothing remained of the body
That had driven Echo to distraction.*

The verse was framed by jelly stickers, which, lined up together, look like a stop-animation of some indeterminate body dancing.

When it proved impossible to sleep, I leaned down, and recovered the letter from my backpack. It had been addressed from the Office of Student Affairs, and gave me the date of my hearing as well as an adviser, Ellen, who was responsible for guiding me through the process.

‡‡

The hearing was held in the Dr. Samuel Parris Conference room on the first floor of the house where the Title IX office was located. Multiple bronze busts had been stationed upon wooden plinths around the room. If one donated enough money to the college, one received such a bust, assembled in the style of Rodin.

A table was located in the room's center. Drilled into the wood were twenty plaques, tarnished and smoke-dimmed. A tan partition had been set up extending halfway to the end of the table, where the Board had installed themselves.

Ellen and I were sat furthest from the door. My chair was hard and wooden, a daffodil carved into the splat. Its back had no headrest, save a single sharp point, like the end of a stake.

Across the room, at the head of the table sat a man in a tweed blazer, whom I was introduced to as Jonathan Proctor, Dean of Student Affairs. He wore a pair of wire-framed glasses situated upon a rather large and misshapen nose. His ears stuck

out from the sides of head. A wild tangle of hair spilled down over them. Jewelry encircled his purplish fingers.

Beside him was the vice president of the college, Elizabeth Proctor, who was Jonathan's half-sister by marriage. She appeared to be in distress. Bones jutted out from papery skin, which looked as though it had been stretched to fit the extremes of her cheekbones, hips, elbows. I heard her cough—harsh, wet. Perhaps she had a cold. She took a pink handkerchief from her pocked, raising it hastily to the Gibraltar that rose majestically from the pale of her face.

Becca Doctor was Dean responsible for my class. She was close to blind. I knew this, because, during orientation, she had told us not to be offended if she didn't greet us if we passed each other on campus, because she could barely see. Thus, she wore large wire framed glasses that magnified and distorted her eyes into semi-globes, which bulged out from an underdeveloped brow. Nervously, she clicked her tongue over and over.

"We will, ahem, excuse me..." The frail woman coughed into her handkerchief so hard that she inadvertently kicked the table, causing the partition to wobble slightly.

Dean Proctor placed one hand on her shoulder. "We are now ready to proceed with the hearing. My apologies for her congested affect. The illness had only lately struck her. We did not have enough preparation to delay today's inquiry." He paused for a moment. "Further, it is my duty to make known that the defendant's lawyer has requested a partition be set between his client and the complainant to prevent additional emotional stress—a request to which we acceded."

I turned to Ellen. "He hired a lawyer?" I whispered, feeling numb to the whole thing. The formality of the hearing felt wrong to me. The Dean was playing sheriff. Here I was, caught inside some sort of dollhouse of justice, surrounded by art objects, the gaze of powerful men.

"Ahem. I'm sorry to intrude, but you may now tender your account."

In that moment, I thought of the psychoanalytical concept of abreaction, wherein one relieves a traumatic event to strip it of its emotional power. One would say, 'This is just a thing that happened. It has no more bearing on my life.' I mused on the unfathomable terrors that can be visited upon discrete bodies: immolation; beheading; genital mutilation. In times of war, otherwise good men have cleaved children in two; have stolen the privacy of the female body; have eliminated whole cultures. And yet, somehow, victims recover, move on, continue. Few people remain eternally tragic to themselves. In fact, those who do are often self-centered, terrible human beings. This is an odd imperative: One must respect tragedy, and let it go.

I stuttered out, "I... I..."

"Take all the time you need," said Jonathan, thinking that he was being kind. I imagined him to be that type of man, who thought himself magnanimous for 'allowing' others to be naturally themselves.

Elizabeth, however, looked pointedly at her wrist, upon which, presumably, reposed the dial of a watch.

"I um..."

"It's okay," said Jonathan.

"I was drunk at a party I think, the last...? Uh I think the... the last weekend before break was over. And I was with my friend Elise and we went inside. We had a bottle of whiskey something cheap like Evan Williams or Wild Turkey that came in a plastic container and got sticky all over our hands. I remember the lights not at the party but... uh... leading up to it, like, lights the ones on the lampposts... that's redundant I'm sorry..." I blushed. I hated myself for blushing. "That was when I knew I was drunk... uh... inebriated is the word... I guess... But so we got drunk with him in his room which was on the floor right below mine and first Elise was really inebriated so I had to take care of her and feed her water so that she would feel... uh... better and I guess I stopped paying attention to my own intake I guess—

"Uh so I think that was around when I got drunk? And then at some point he made an... inappropriate comment... about my ass uh too while we were in his room that made me feel really uh uncomfortable.... but like what can you do that's just how it is you know so I laughed it off but that was really threatening in retrospect. Then we went to the party and he went to smoke and Elise and I went inside. It was really crowded which... made me really anxious and nervous. We went to the living room where there was this really uh loud set of speakers. I couldn't hear or see anything. The last thing I remember before waking up was Elise's hand on my hip."

"Waking up?"

"Yes. I had been um... dreaming... I don't remember much of it just a flash of yellow and then blue darker blue darker blue black and a sudden pain because I was completely dry and he had probably just forced it in but I um... I can't say for sure. But he pushed and pushed and I played dead and did my best not to make a sound. I

didn't really know what was happening besides the feeling of pressure and pain. I think I disassociated I began to focus on the softness of his pillow, and the beginnings of dawn outside his window..."

As I spoke, I felt his pressure. His body. The sweat pooling on my back. I felt the fluid inside of me, the flop of penis, the slight contraction of his ass, the bony points of his thighs. Anxiety is a hollow horror. It is a ghost. Impossible to swat away. Barely perceivable to the eye. One talks of the shock of anger, sadness, as though it were a hyperbolic cliché, but the feel of an anxiety attack, right then, my first, in that hearing, was that of an electric jolt. Everything became static, fuzzy. I almost fell out of my chair. My soul began to jitter, my organs danced a harsh waltz upon my stomach.

Later, I would learn that this is what is called a flashback, but at the moment I thought that my body had punished me for speaking. In fact, a traumatic event is named as such only when the experience is so emotionally taxing that the brain cannot bear the strain of recording the event as one discrete memory. Rather, the memory is shattered—the brain takes a hammer to trauma—and the shards are randomly placed throughout the temporal lobes. One could compare the reclamation of traumatic memory to the discovery of something like the Lascaux Cave. While looking for something normal—a dog that has roamed too far afield—one instead accidentally stumbles upon a store of images that totally reorients one's entire life, that permanently changes the shape of one's existence.

So, I sensed the world reorienting itself around me. Not because I had recovered a memory I had repressed, or forgotten, but because an experience that

had become dull in my mind, drained of color, once again became sharp and vibrant. I smelled urea. I heard the apish grunting. I saw his eyes, pleading. His face behind the tan partition, his phantom presence, the heat from his body, the alkaline smell of stress and fear—it overwhelmed me. I could not bear to form words.

“Give her a second,” said Ellen. “Let her breathe.”

“I’m... Oh my god I’m so sorry about that. I’m so sorry I don’t know what happened. I just... HUUUUUHH. I... It was it was uh over then and he bent down... and I saw I saw I saw his face and his eyes were wide and his lips were quivering and they quivered and quivered and then they set into a sort of grimace like a smile but not really a smile and he knelt on the floor for a while breathing hard and I was breathing hard and our breathing went in and out of sync and started to cry and I did not but I looked at him not because I wanted to but because my body would not move and I cannot look away but he got up and let my sight and I think sat down somewhere probably at his desk and I could hear him huffing in—“

Vice President Proctor shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“—and out and could feel the tears on his face and could tell that he had made a mistake and I felt sad for him but also confused and angry and scared none of these emotions separate from each other all of them tangled up but I also knew clearly that I had been taken advantage of in a horrible way and that I had been physically violated and it was not knowledge that I wanted to face so I slowly over the period of about maybe twenty minutes though I do not really know because time was not really moving at that point I slid out of bed and I found my underwear and pants and got dressed looking at the ground the whole time and then I left not

looking at him refusing to look but also unable to look if I had looked I would have fallen I wouldn't have been able to move so I couldn't look I went back to my room and got in bed and was alone because my roommate was locked in her practice room for the night and it was only when I was in bed with my blanket up around my chin and I could feel warmth on my chin that my whole body began to shake and I cried and cried until my head hurt and I had to force myself up to get an Advil and I took it and then I took another and I had some Ambien so I took one of those and within a couple of minutes I was asleep..."

"Goodness," Elizabeth exclaimed.

"There, there," said Jonathan, patting his relative's hand.

"Jon, I'm not a damn child."

He removed his hand. "I apologize for the condescension. I simply was providing the requisite sympathetic response."

"Thank you," she said, inclining her head. "...Maybe put the hand back?"

"My pleasure..."

As Dean Proctor continued to ministrate, Ellen held me tightly, and, slowly, I began to weep. I knew he could hear me, and I wondered what he felt. I focused on him, his experience, and became enraged, weeping harder. Even now, I continued to put a male experience before any of my own. When, finally, the tears stopped, and I began once again to breathe normally, I noticed that Dean Proctor staring at my ruined form. Although he tried to hide it, I could tell that he was immensely bored. I glared at him. I allowed unclothed anger to dare him into response. He deferred, asking instead if I was 'okay.' Trembling with rage, I could not assent. But, as quickly

as it came, the fury evacuated my body, leaving me tired and bland. I nodded. The dean turned from me.

Defendant, the floor is yours," he said.

As used I was to disembodied voices, to echoes, to repetition, to small gaps in reply and response, it was still a shock, in real, non-virtual, non-digital life to hear his voice disembodied from its speaker. It sounded different somehow—colder, less emotionally accessible, but at the same time more universal, as though its detachment allowed it direct access the realm of consciousness. The voice began to assume the rhythms of the voice in my own head.

Most of what I have learned, I have learned through disembodied voice. That was the essayistic form. That was the bedrock of education, criticism, analysis, history, psychology, of the humanities in general. But, I rarely heard such a voice immediately spoken—the only mediation a single tan partition and the minute vibrations of an infinite number of particles of air. I was more used to colonizing another's voice with my own, and had been actively encouraged to do so. Emerson had no way of rebutting my essays. He was a corpse. My disappointment with words was that they were of indeterminate sense. My voice could be twisted to say whatever someone wants me to say. My body could be moved to act however another wants me to act. I was a puppet eternally vulnerable to attacks of word and imagination. So, when he spoke, and I heard his voice, high, parched for water, and I heard him manipulate my mind and my body in various directions, I knew that I had lost a certain amount of control over myself, and that I would never, ever, be able to gain it back.

“We were at that party, and I was outside smoking with my friend Chuck, who is here, and can corroborate this. I was smoking Marlboro Reds and they were smoking the dark blue American Spirits and were making fun of me for smoking Reds because they said that Reds tasted terrible and I was like ‘no way, bullshit.’ We were all laughing and having a good time. Dan gave me a beer, and we were all smoking and drinking. I finished the beer and Dan gave me another. I decided to go inside to find where Elise had gone, to make sure she was all right. Chuck said I should hook up with her. I said no, that made me uncomfortable. So, I went inside to the kitchen which was packed and I started sweating immediately. Then, I moved uh... or I took my jacket off. Underneath I was wearing a Smiths shirt with the *Meat is Murder* cover on it in green. I made my way through the crowd until I reached the living room where people were dancing. From the living room uh—“

“The plainant,” interjected a deep voice.

“—uh the plainant yelled to me in a voice that she thought my Smiths shirt made me look like a “stupid fuckboy idiot” to which I responded “damn you’re fucked up,” and she beckoned me over to where she was dancing with Elise, and gave me the bottle of Evan Williams, I think. I took a pull, because dancing has always made me really nervous. I was staring at the ceiling, moving as little as possible, kind of willing myself to disappear. But, the plainant kept making me drink. Or, well, not making me, but basically putting the bottle in front of my face, and then I would drink because I was already a little drunk and couldn’t really refuse what was already there. So, I was getting more and more drunk. I was starting to loosen up and dance for real, with a little more physical contact, gradually. I was being

careful about not really overreaching or anything, trying to ask and make sure it was okay, but then the plainant whispered, in my ear, 'stop being a pussy,' and took my hands and we began to dance together. I was trying to be funny, so I shook my hips sort of exaggeratedly. I didn't really know what I was doing. I could feel myself blushing. The plainant was biting her lip. Her hands were sweaty, and so were mine. We were dancing and talking, like friends. At one point we went outside to cool off. She had the bottle of whiskey now in a Nalgene. Actually, it might have been in a Nalgene all along. I think she changed it out when we left the dorms, probably. But she kept drinking, and offered me the bottle, and I kept drinking as well. Soon, we had finished the whiskey. We went back inside to dance with Elise, but Elise was in the corner, making out with a friend of mine. We were both like 'good for her,' but I know I was a little jealous. I was pretty drunk, so I was horny—"

There was a pause, during which I assume the lawyer had whispered something in his ear because he when he continued, he was careful to avoid crudities.

"uh... I was... sexually aroused because of being intoxicated. But, I was also fully in control of myself. I was just intoxicated. The plainant pulled me close to her and we began to dance again, but also continued to look over at Elise. She looked up at me and I looked down at her. Then, we began to make out, and I pulled away, saying it was weird. She pulled me back in. Then she pulled away, saying, you know what, it was weird. Then, I was kind of annoyed and pulled her back in. Then, we both pulled apart. Elise had returned, and was looking at the both of us with a sort of bemused expression. The plainant smiled coyly. I shrugged. All three of us continued

dancing. Eventually Elise left, maybe to use the bathroom, or to meet up with my friend. I don't know. Right then, the plaintiff took my hand, and whispered in my ear, 'come with me.'

"When we got back to my room we immediately took our jackets off and the plainant looked into my eyes and I looked into hers. They were cloudy and dilated. She had her head uh... cocked... like so... and then I leaned in and she got up on her toes and we began to make out for a while, for like an hour. I went to grab a condom, because I felt the moment was right. First she pushed back a few step, and said 'no,' in a loud voice. And I said, 'okay,' and immediately put it away. We made out a little more, and then she pulled back and looked in my eyes and said, 'It's okay. I want it. It's fine.' I asked, 'Are you sure?' The plainant said yes, and nodded, so I grabbed the condom out of the drawer. We continued to make out and take off our clothes. All of mine were off before hers, and she sort of was coaxing me to get her out of her clothes, as like a sexy coy thing. It felt sort of like *Breathless*, if you know *Breathless*. So then we started to have sex, first in missionary, and then from behind, where she was laying on the bed, and I couldn't see her face. It takes me a while to finish so I couldn't see her face for a long time. Finally, I came, and pulled out, and attempted to communicate with the plainant, to which I received no response. So, I got off of my bed, and knelt down. That was when I saw that she had been crying. And that he eyes were red. I apologized and apologized. I was terrified, in shock. I fell down and had to prop myself up against the door, to keep from falling to pieces on the floor. We stayed in those positions for a while, until, eventually, she got up and left, without looking at me. I was panicking. I had no idea what had happened. I figured

that she hated me now, that I had done something totally, indescribably wrong. But, I don't know how. Even now, I don't really know what happened."

He stopped speaking. I could hear his worry. It was in the air, in the silence. He knew that his explanation was unclear, inconclusive. He was afraid there would be follow up questions. They would scrape the truth out of him like a crab's meat from its carapace. But, nothing was asked.

"Thank you for your testimony," said Jonathan, glancing sidelong at my ruined face. It took all my willpower to remain externally impassive.

"I now cede the floor to Becca Doctor, Dean of the Freshman Class, who shall facilitate the testimony and examination of witnesses."

"Thank you, Jonathan," said Becca shrilly. She left the room, returning a moment later with Elise, who sat at the head of the table, next to the dean.

"Please, Ms. Desrosiers, if you would..."

Elise looked beautiful. Her hair had been curled and set in place. She was wearing makeup, not a lot, a bit of lipstick and blush, but it was maybe the second time I'd seen her augmenting herself. Straight-backed, hands folded in front of her, a white gold necklace spilling gracefully over her clavicle, I had the horrible realization that she had dressed up for this hearing. This was her declaration of support.

"I accompanied the plainant and defendant to an event on South Campus. The plainant and I entered the venue, while the defendant remained outdoors. We were dancing in the living room. The defendant joined us. He kept whispering in the plainant's ear, and she kept pushing him away, giggling. The plainant then

whispered in my ear, 'He wants to fuck me.' I laughed at the comment. I laughed. I thought that was ridiculous. The plainant, the defendant and I continued to dance for a while. Eventually, I left to dance with another student and they went outside to cool off when I noticed that they had returned, I went again to dance with them. I noticed that student staring at me from the kitchen, and went to drag him over to dance. But, when I returned, the plainant and defendant had disappeared.

"The only reason I knew that anything was wrong was because the plainant began crying nonstop, and she stopped really talking, but I didn't have any idea what had happened until a few weeks ago..."

"Ms. Desrosiers, you did not see the defendant engaged in any sexual malfeasance?"

Elise hesitated. "No..." she said, quietly. She lowered her head. One of her hands grasped the other.

"Continue."

"I have watched the plainant be destroyed by the actions of the defendant. His carelessness and viciousness are unforgivable. And... And..."

"Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us?"

"Just... Just that this has had a terrible effect on the... the plainant. And that this definitely happened. And that I don't know how you can even question that."

At this moment, I felt a great affinity with Elise. She was watching as the institution erased the event. I had her, to agree that the assault had occurred. That it was not all in my head.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. I will escort you out."

Becca Doctor stiffly maneuvered her way out of her chair, and place a hand on Elise's back in what was clearly meant to be a comforting gesture. They walked out together.

The dean returned with Chuck, a stout boy wearing a white beanie and faded t shirt. He seemed to be unable to conceal his emotions. I watched as hatred and confusion battled across his face.

"This is a great guy," Chuck said, pointing to the other side of the partition. His voice cracked. He sounded like he was on the verge of tears. "He's always been so kind, so careful and considerate of others. He's one of the best people I know." Chuck looked me in the eyes. Stared at me. I felt his anger pulsing.

"And her, for her to say this... this... She's lying. That's it. That's all it is. She's lying. She wanted to fuck my friend and she didn't like it and now she's pissed. She built it up in her head and thought it would be something that it was not. That's what happened. I know it. She knows it. We all know it. He's got no record of sexual assault. He's not a repeat offender. The charge is bullshit. I can't even believe that the college has investigated it. Has acknowledged it!"

He paused, panting.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so angry. It's just, I can't believe someone would lie about something so serious. I just can't believe it. That she would ruin my friend's life just because she's mad at him. That's just... unconscionable. It's just... I can't even..."

He fell silent. I was astonished. I had expected anger, but not denunciation. On every promotional brochure was this quote of the President's: *We demand true thought and acceptance. We live by difference.* I had thought this meant that, if I spoke, I would be heard, and accepted. *Educatio est Magnum.* Chuck did not want to believe me. He did not want to believe that he was friends with a criminal. He did not want to look and see the rot that accompanies the core. He may never have to. I was the rot, the dead one.

Chuck left with Becca Doctor, visibly shaking. The dean brought in another student, this time female, whom I recognized as someone that he had dated for a few months our first semester, before breaking it off, on the recommendation of Elise and myself.

She sat in the same chair as the others. Her long brown hair tumbled down her chest like a small child down a steep hill. She sucked in her cheeks, and puffed them out, as though trying to find a facial shape that would fit the proceedings.

"For those of you who don't know, I'm Rory, Jackson's girlfriend."

Hearing his name spoken aloud, the syllables directed like arrows at my chest, hurt deeply. If I could have just kept him a he, he would have slowly dissolved into vagueness and mist. I would forget his painful contours. A name is a tag of existence. The color of his hair, the sound of his breathing, the way he laughed—his particular someone-ness. All were brought back, memories battering my skull. The loop of the J and harsh crack of plosive, ending in the elegant occlusion of the N, slowly tapering to silence.

“We had dated for a little while the first semester. Jackson was a perfect gentleman. *So* respectful. He perfectly understood my emotional needs, which is what made him, ahem, makes him, such a great boyfriend. The defendant was jealous of my relationship. It is totally understandable. I mean, I get it. But to do something like this. These are serious allegations. And like I mean clearly he doesn’t like you very much. I mean, I can’t believe you thought this would basically help you out. It’s a completely reasonable lie. I probably would have done the same thing in your position. But, I suppose that doesn’t make it right. It is still wrong.”

Dean Proctor rose and helped Rory up from her seat. They glided to the door, Proctor gently pushed her out. She deserved a greater push, an eagle to swoop down and force her, like Ganymede, into the sky, transformed into eleven radiant orbs, pearls fixed in the heavens’ cloth.

“I shall entreat the pertinent parties to evacuate the room,” he boomed, when he had returned, “so that the board may facilitate a decision. We shall assess all that has been presented before us, and from the gathered information determine the best course of action. Thank you for your time.”

I rose, Ellen holding my hand. We began to leave. For an instant, I caught sight of his face. It looked lined, weary. His eyes caught mine. His gaze was soft. He seemed comforted by my presence. Then, he turned toward his lawyer, and we absented the room.

◇◇◇ III ◇◇◇

When Soto awoke, head foggy, back aching, an iron band like a vice grip pulsing around his temples, he panicked. The last thing he could recall was leaving his house and heading toward the bar. His neurons, fizzing with electricity, had paralyzed him. After a few minutes of intense concentration, he became able, with great difficulty, to waggle his tongue, and, blearily, to blink. The recollection of his failed attempt at masturbation swept a fresh wave of pain through his body.

He shivered. He rolled his wrists, waggled his toes, reacquainted himself with consciousness.

He could not focus his eyes. Around him, the room shimmered. The dresser blurred into the mirror, which blurred into the tan walls, so that it appeared to be almost a portal to the next world.

Soto stared for a while at his own head, peeking up from over the duvet. He felt unable to tear his eyes away.

When he eventually did so, he noticed there was another body present in his bed. It was small, bony, female. Soto could see brown roots peaking out beneath a peroxidized curtain of hair. A daffodil had been tattooed on her right shoulder, over the blade, which stuck out from her back like a fin, grotesquely distorting the flowered ink upon it. A colony of moles bedecked the opposite shoulder: nineteen raised growths, variously sizes, set in the shape of a crooked balbis, top half straight

outwards like a bull's horns, bottom half spread wider, one line unbent, the other curved slightly at the middle.

Slowly, he struggled out of bed. As he passed by the body, peregrinating toward the kitchen, Soto attempted to ascertain its identity. He could not. More bleached hair was covering her face. The duvet had been pulled up to her chin. All Soto could see were a pair of thin lips, a graceful hand—black nail polish chipping, and the slightest hint of wrist, which may have also included the beginning of what looked like another tattoo.

He wanted desperately to brush the hair away from the body's face. He took a few steps toward the bed, before stopping abruptly. Such a gesture—the hand gently sweeping the hair to one side, barely touching the skin—seemed far too intimate. Soto scuffed one foot on his floor, then the other.

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As the eggs sizzled in their cast iron caldera, coffee percolated in the pot, bacon finished and plated, Soto heard someone tiptoe into the kitchen. He looked up to see a girl wearing an oversized white shirt, which she had no doubt excavated from his dresser. Bleached hair tumbled down to her shoulder. A tattoo of a sonogram was visible against the white of her forearm.

“Morning...” said Nina.

Good uh... Good morning.” Soto said, brusquely. He focused on his eggs, attempting to drive all discomfort and anxiety from his mind.

“I—I was really drunk... I’m sorry...”

“It’s... um... It’s fine.”

Nina moved closer to Soto, brushing against the wall with her fingertips. Soto noted that this had been a habit of Elise’s as well.

“No... seriously...” she said. “This must be really uncomfortable for you.”

Soto could barely keep a grip on his spatula. His hands shook violently. He appreciated that Nina’s first thought was for him, and not herself. But, such appreciation only made him more upset. This kind of selflessness only reminded him of his own egotism. He wanted to be the object of Nina’s attention, as though it could heal the wound left by Elise’s absence. But, at the same time he was afraid this child would see the ruin of his life, and the failure of his character.

“Nina I appreciate the sentiment, but—and that’s very kind of you to say, but that’s not really the big issue—”

“No I know I know. Sorry... Sorry I know. It’s not about that.”

“No no! It’s just that...”

“I totally understand. I’m so sorry... Listen, I’ll leave... It’s no big deal.”

She turned to go. Soto was assailed by a vision of Elise in a similar white shirt.

“No Nina it’s um it’s ok! Don’t worry. Uh...” He gestured awkwardly with the spatula, which almost flew out of his hand toward the ceiling, “I made us breakfast.”

Oh...”

"You hear that sound?"

"I—I believe so."

"Well, those are eggs."

"Thanks..."

"Uh... yeah..."

"I'm sorry. This is a little awkward for me."

"No I know. My bad."

"It's okay."

"Okay, okay thanks. Here's the coffee."

"Thank you."

"So, uh..."

"Yes?"

"I don't really know how to ask this..."

"Uh... what?"

"It's just..."

"Kevin, this is making me feel weird."

Nina pulled her phone out. As far as Soto could tell, there were no pockets in his shirt. Soto didn't know where it came from. Maybe students nowadays had become so tapped into their technology that the technology itself could now anticipate students' needs. Smartphones had become a conduit to a carefully managed virtual space in which one could easily structure human relations. As with a pet, one would still receive love, while ceding the emotional responsibility of reciprocation.

“Uh... Nina...”

“Hm? Oh! Oh... I’m sorry. It’s a reflex.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it actually really bothers me.”

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

“No, I mean, you should see my friends and I... Like when we’re at home? It’s terrible. We all um sitting in the same room and uh everyone is on their phones. Like, not talking, not uh looking at each other, just like staring at a screen. That’s like eighty percent of our home life.”

That sounds pretty good, actually, thought Soto. No talking. It minimizes conversational mistakes, decreases the risk of possibly offending someone. Soto began to mentally devise a system of ratios, apportioning out time spent on his phone during conversation versus distance from his friends in the city, calculating the correspondence between the two—miles vs. minutes of virtual distraction, so that, if Beard was located about ninety miles north of the city, and a normal night with his friends lasted approximately four hours, he could move one mile closer to the city for every quarter minute spent trawling the internet.

“That sounds tough,” he said.

“It’s not tough, really, so much as depressing.”

“*Depressing*—now that’s a word...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well like it’s been really interesting over the past twenty years the way that the word ‘depressing’ has changed its use. It used to be really clandestine and bad. You didn’t want anything to be depressing. But now it’s a ubiquitous descriptor.”

“That’s really... I get that... Sort of like a devaluation of the word?”

“Exactly.”

“Wow I uh... I think that’s really true...”

“Hm...”

“Certain words have been kind of just devalued by their usage in general... or like their overuse. Think about my project, about how the male character’s name disappears for like fifty pages. Instead of using the word I just wanted to avoid it...”

“Ah...”

“...”

“So um how is... how’s your breakfast...?”

“It’s great uh thanks for asking. The coffee too.”

“I’m glad...”

Nina took a deep breath.

“Yes?”

“I was rereading *The Crown of Life* the other day and I’m just wondering and you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to but I thought I’d ask just like how did you write it?”

Soto laughed. Quite honestly, he didn’t really remember. All the events that he depicted had occurred, or been inspired, during his first few years out of college, struggling to make meaning of his life. The crown of life, he remembered, had been

faith. He had adapted something that his father had told him, once an incipient tumor had been discovered in his brain, and his father had to give up his work, and spend his time puttering about an unfurnished condominium—the condo not because he didn’t have the money for a house, but because he didn’t believe he needed it. Even when faced with certain death, he continued to pinch pennies. The riches of embarrassment. The way Soto wrote the scene had his father reclining Greek-like upon a couch, speaking to his son, the Soto character—or sort of, Soto still wasn’t really clear just how much this character was or was not in fact an avatar of himself—saying that his life was his life and he lived it and had no regrets and that the happiest or most efficacious use the Soto character could make of his father’s death would be to let his father’s example inspire faith and courage and then to allow that faith and courage to inspire the Soto character to live his life to the fullest. That had been the crown of life: faith and courage. The rest of the novel was the Soto character attempting to live up to this charge, alternately grateful for his father’s sudden magnanimity and resentful of it—as though a moment of good advice could make up for a lifetime of emotional austerity.

“I get that it’s a sort of crass question and I’m sorry to be so forward but I just really love the book.”

“Doesn’t that kind of ruin the fun of reading it, though?”

“Well... no... Or well I don’t know. Maybe. I guess I just want to know.”

“I don’t mean to patronize you or anything, but this is an impulse I think you should ignore.”

“...”

“Oh god... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to put that way. That was really bad. No, just, it does make me a little uncomfortable to talk about. It’s sort of a tough personal thing.”

“No I understand, sorry. That just threw me off a little.”

“Totally my bad...”

“No, no... It’s just... It’s a book I really, really love...”

“Please... no...”

She laughed. “Sorry I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’m just really... overwhelmed to be here right now, you know?”

“I... uh... No I don’t think so...?”

“Just sort of happy I guess... This is nice...”

“It’s uh... yeah... It’s nice.”

“You’ve been a great advisor...”

“It uh... it hasn’t been tough... The credit is on you...”

“Please, no... I couldn’t have done anything with you. Or, if not you directly than definitely not without *The Crown of Life*. It’s been so great working together.”

“Really the credit is all yours. You’re really very intelligent and a great writer.”

“Thank you.”

Nina put her hand over his. He could feel her resolve. For the first time, he felt her presence in his home. She was a stone, determined to stand against the bluster of his divided life. He would erode her, slowly, grain by grain. Wind and

water. Anger and fear. Once she left, he thought, it might be a good time to clean the house. Spring was almost here.



Soto spent the next week in a state of nervous frenzy. He had cleaned his home in a delirium, expunging any evidence of Nina's presence. Despite his best attempts to forget what had occurred, the next time he opened up his computer, checking Beard's brontosaurian e-mail server, he discovered a message from Nina. She asked if he would be free to meet the next Thursday at Adolph's. He declined to respond, and decided, instead, to try color-coding his books, based upon an article that he'd recently read. He began with the whites. Nabokov's *Pnin*, the copy with the main character's head replaced with an origami swan, sat alongside a hard cover copy of John William's *Stoner*, which was next to a bound collection of two of Nicholson Baker's novels *The Anthologist* and *Travelling Sprinkler*, upon which a smoking cigar and a plum were painted in watercolor.

The majority of the writers that he catalogued were straight white men with sex lives even more uninspired than his own. Nabokov, for example, loved greatly, but fucked poorly. His letters to Vera were a monumental expression of human emotion, but his dick inevitably directed itself towards her mind rather than her body. Nicholson Baker, similarly, had known his wife since they had met in college,

and he never had the chance to experience the desperate scorch of fetishism, the fraught idea that sexual fixation could lead to an otherwise elusive fulfillment.

It struck Soto as surprising, though understandable, the degree to which many writers were terrible at interpersonal relations, as though the relations themselves sapped from the writer whatever magic allowed them to so presciently represent human connection. Such a gift, it seemed, both allowed the writer a deeper engagement with other human beings, while at the same time isolating him from the very people whom he knew so well.

Soto acutely felt his separation from others, which was not physical, or locational, or ideological, but somehow spiritual. He thought of essences. Of capturing his soul in words. He began to fantasize about absolution. Once, while teaching, Soto almost leapt up out of his desk, like a penitent before God, to confess his sins. It took all of his self-control to restrain himself. He grabbed a handful of his shirt, and wiped it across his forehead. A sweat stain appeared on his chest like a Rorschach blot.

Soto stalked the streets of his town in constant and absurd fear of running into Nina. He did not feel safe, not even in his own home, where Elise's smell, it appeared to Soto, had been replaced with something else—the fry of bacon grease, the earthy stench of vertiginous desire. No longer did Soto's home deal in tastes and tinctures. His domestic mien now rudely asserted itself, representative of a febrile present. It was as though Nina's presence had recalled certain parts of Elise that Soto had previously let fade, and forgotten—her half moon of ass, the skin stretched translucent across her thighs, the birthmark above her left nipple, a brown spot like

a small planet orbiting a larger star. Soto remembered the way that she would hold him, one arm between his shoulder blades, the other slung across the interstice between his pectoral muscles and belly. He remembered the delicate expansions of her breathing, her chest bones dancing outward, like performers in some abstract ballet. The sound of her breathing even, throaty, oddly high pitched, and the way that her skin tasted—like a mixture of blood and pitted fruit, still enflamed him with a thickening desire.

So, he thought, was it Nina's ghost torturing him, or just the return of Elise's? Nina was not present behind Soto. Neither was Elise. They existed all as projection. They existed only in Soto's brain, in his willingness to see situations as other than they were, in his flights to fantasy, which often appeared truer than reality. Peaceful reality—without reason, idea, or understanding. It became easier to devise a story than accept reality's disappointments. Perhaps, Soto thought, part of this difficulty had evolved through an inability to accept any explanatory narrative for his life's occurrences. He could not believe in the imaginary of his own words. His self-expression had been compromised.

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Soto had become so distressed that he could barely eat. Perhaps this was all for the better, as the food that had been relegated to the professors' area of the

dining hall was more or less inedible. There were half cooked pasta shells covered in what Soto vaguely counted as a vodka sauce, mostly because of its pink pastel hue; greens so floppy and dead that it appeared as though their nutrients had been sautéed to near death, and then drowned in a pool of off-brand vegetable oil; and a brown lump of some miscellaneous animal that had, it appeared to Soto, been raised in a desert, having never in its short lifetime encountered a single moist thing, having died by means of dehydration, before its body was freeze-dried, and shipped to Beard, where it had been subsequently defrosted, further drained of liquid, then placed in an oven for at least half a day, before being served to the faculty.

All Soto took were some greens, and a cup of black coffee. He decided to sit alone away from the rest of the faculty, eating the greens slowly. Beneath the table his leg jiggled frantically. Up and down; up and down. It shook the table, causing Soto to occasionally miss a green with his fork, and accidentally project small bits of oil on to his white oxford, speckling his shirt. Professor Grandel walked past, giving him a once over on her way to procure some strawberry ice cream. His messiness, nervousness, he thought, made him suspect to Maggie's puritanical McCarthyism, so he hastily finished his food, and left the building.

Soto perceived the totality of objects around him suddenly shimmering, the trees, students, benches, bricks, as though turgid reality had begun to blur together, liquify, grow ragged around the edges. This carefully constructed edifice, this "world" that Soto knew as though it were fact, had suddenly decided to cast off its mantle, and assume a state of surreality that was, in fact, its natural form.

No sooner had he escaped outside that he ran into Abner Eptazoes, come from teaching his only class, on Poetry and Ethics.

“Good afternoon, Kevin,” he announced amicably.

Soto had developed a skill as a masterful liar, and even though he desired nothing more than to tell the truth, or to be honest to others and to himself, his dishonest abilities had been so finely honed that it became virtually impossible for him to communicate anything, even the simplest statement, without its being somehow washed in the blue light of untruth, so that, when Soto spoke, it became almost impossible for him to determine, unless he concentrated exceptionally hard, whether what he was saying was honest, or not, or what specific mixture of honesty and dishonesty made up any particular statement. So, it did not take much, on the face of it, for Soto to ignore or deflect what was so urgently taking place inside of him. Rather, Soto was tortured by the fact that he could not, even if he really wanted to, totally speak the truth. Everything came out mediated and mitigated. What frightened and pained Soto was that, even now, in a fairly dire circumstance, he still could not force himself to speak truthfully to this man who had offered him nothing but advice and good counsel. Even now, Soto could not bear to help himself.

He hurried to his car, and drove home, pursued, he felt, by the watchful eyes of Professor Grandel. She had recognized his intentions before he had himself. Somehow, she knew what would happen with Nina. That was why she had reported him to Abner. Because she could sense it. She could sense it somewhere within him. And he could not. He had failed so greatly at knowing those close to him, and now—now he didn’t even have the ability to know himself. He needed another to point out

to him what he should have already known. He needed another to show him through the world, as Elise had done, when she moved him out of his apartment and into her own, and shown him the right way to tie a Windsor knot, taught him how to eat continental style with the fork in one hand and the knife in the other.

Soto still felt as though he were ill equipped for the triumphs and tragedies of his own life. He could hardly withstand a failed relationship any more than he could a critically acclaimed novel. Both stenciled his horror upon the wall: that neither produced his suffering nor his joy—that his emotional states were random at best. Soto often wished that he could better control himself. He was constantly buffeted by the winds and waves of his emotions, anxieties, dreads, joys, loves, to the point where he almost did not trust himself to be, at any particular moment, a true human being, because he could never be sure just how much his perception of the world had been distorted by internal states that he could not necessarily sense, or recognized the effects of.

Perhaps, he thought, nothing had really happened between Nina and himself, and he was simply bending his head at the guillotine. If she tried to pull something he would swiftly and professionally, though also compassionately, adjust her impressions. He returned home and resolved to email his young charge, cleaving to his picture of preceding events. Sending the email he felt a twinge of guilt. But, he thought, no signal is definite. Commitment occurs only in direct, unforced expression. So, as far as Soto thought, he was in the clear, and could do whatever he wanted. He didn't owe Nina anything, besides to what he had expressly agreed.

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Back in Adolph's, Soto watched the bar fill with drunken students. He could hear their unsure chirping after the bartenders, tentative passing of fake IDs, boys puffing their chests out like ducks. Soto took great joy in noticing these boys attempt to drink their scotch while hiding their distaste for its undiluted acridity. He could intuit their dreams of maturity, what they believed a man to be.

Soto wasn't any different when he was in college, or he didn't imagine himself as such. As disdainful as he was of the "meat market" perpetuated by the college's social scene, which he only really descried via workshop fiction, he found himself, despite his more mature inclinations, slightly envious of such an one-sidedly enterprising view of intimate human relationships. And, even though he had never, he supposed, not been critical of such mercenary sexuality, there had once been a time during the autumn of his youth where he accepted such a perspective with begrudging respect, rather than a resigned nostalgia, bordering on despair. Now, watching these kids, he mostly felt sadness.

Certainly, since he was college age, the ideal avatar of masculinity had drastically changed. Soto appraised the boy nearest him, all high cheekbones and dimples. Androgyny was now the preferred aesthetic. Women seemed now to gravitate to willowy, hairless men. This made sense to Soto, somehow. It was easy for him to rationalize. Women were drawn to those who mirrored them, who could

show them back to themselves. This boy could pass for a reflection. But, of course, internally, biologically, he was entirely different. He was a mix of safety and adventure, risk and comfort.

Soto had to remind himself that, in fact, he knew nothing about this student. He was not even sure that *was* a student. Perhaps he was just trying to distract himself from Nina, he thought, as they spoke about some of the specifics of her project. She hadn't yet attempted to touch him, for which he was infinitely grateful, but he knew that it was coming. He could see it in the slight narrowing of her eyes, the purse of her lips, her predatory posture—arms tensed, leaning slightly forward.

"I don't quite understand," Soto said, "why the narrator is unnamed. Perhaps this is just me being obtuse, but I'm not sure that it adds anything to the narrative."

"Well..." Nina hesitated, "I'm not sure I have a great like, answer? to that really. I felt like a... a name sort of indicated a kind of personalizing softness? Like the experience of a character without a name feels somehow colder or more frightening I think..."

Behind Nina, Soto saw the boy with high cheekbones place his hand on the bare shoulder of a girl wearing a halter-top. She shrugged off his arm. He frowned, and retreated to the other side of the bar, at which sat another girl, forlornly sipping her mixed drink.

"Kevin."

"Uh..." said Soto, startled.

Nina turned around to appraise Soto's view.

"That's disgusting," she said.

“What?”

“It’s just that that boy like just totally devalued her...”

“Hm?”

“Well like he... I guess I didn’t see it but...”

“He tried to touch a girl and she didn’t let him.”

“Okay. Right. So this is what I’m saying because she didn’t let him put his hand on her thigh or whatever he just leaves because he can’t get what he wants basically. So it reinforces this paradigm where the only way a woman thinks that a man will pay attention to her is if she lets him fuck her or just like view her as a sex object.”

Soto thought back to a moment, early in his years at the MFA program, wherein he and Alana had found themselves alone at a bar, after a particularly harsh critique of one of her stories. They had been drinking all night. Alcohol’s warm nimbus had numbed Soto’s mind. Sensing weakness, he had placed his hand on Alana’s back. He had known that the impulse was misguided—that he had been acting out of predatory instinct. But, he could not stop himself.

Soto remembered Alana’s eyes. The fear. How had she laughed cautiously at his jokes, and how he had attempted to manage the situation and went to the bathroom to try to get a handle on his malfunctioning brain. When he returned Alana had gone, and it had taken a week or so before they spoke again.

“It is terrible,” Soto said, agreeing. “But listen, that’s actually something I want to talk about with the work. The male character still feels a little flat, you know? He almost feels demonized.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think its just that for the situation that you described the work would retain more power if you made it a little more morally ambiguous.”

Nina gently took Soto’s hand, much the way that a mother would quickly slip her fingers around her child’s after school had let out, to guide the child back home. “But its not supposed to be morally ambiguous,” she said. “This is what happens. Believe me. It’s this terrible.”

“That may be so...” Soto said, hesitating. He wasn’t sure if it was worth saying what came next. “But you’re writing a work of fiction. It doesn’t always work right to present everything exactly how it happens.”

He could see in Nina’s eyes that he had offended her. “Even if it’s an epidemic basically or like a sexual sickness, even if the schools won’t do anything about it, even if nobody’s really talking about it, and nothing’s changing?”

“Nina... I’m trying to focus on the work, what will make the work better. That’s what I’m trying to think about. I didn’t mean to offend you or be at all insensitive. This is just my opinion.”

“I...”

“It’s okay... Don’t worry about it...”

“No, I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay no need to apologize...”

“No I didn’t mean to go off on you like that. That was really terrible...”

“No it’s okay. I said something I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry.”

Nina squeezed his hand.

“Thank you,” she said. For the first time, Soto could see an animal need in her eyes. It frightened him. An intimacy brought on by fear. A need for another person to act as a shield from one’s own feelings.

Soto knew this need. He had buried himself in Elise, and she in him. They found solace from their problems by displacing them onto the other. They became each other’s shield of flesh, until even such an earthly shield had been compressed into diamond by the magnificent pressure of their self-hatred.

In *The Crown of Life* he had written a chapter about his father’s hungry stare. He had described the hunger as being for faith, for a kind of belief of his father’s that he had lived for some particular reason—that he had done or worked towards some particular good. Love, maybe. A faith in having lived one’s life in the service of love. This would engender a life lived free of willful distortions, metaphysical haughtiness, and noetic pretension. So, Soto wrote, his father had, on his deathbed, attempted to convince himself that his life, flawed though it was, had shaped him in love’s image. Thus, the central conceit of the novel was the Soto character’s decision, or ability, whether to accept his father’s new orientation toward his own life, which given the difficulties that his father had put him through was a torture of utmost gravity. The novel explored the difficulties of the childhood that his father had put him through, along with what he felt was an inborn familial love and obligation towards his father, who, as much as the Soto character hated to admit it, had stuck around and did in fact raise him. The Soto character believed that to some greater or lesser degree he owed his father some debt of gratitude. This especially because his mother had left this earth so early in his naissance that he could only remember the

barest shadow of her face, and loved her more in the way that one loves a distant relative than with the mixture of vulnerability and passion that one loves a parent.

Soto wondered just what fools of fate had physically conspired to bring this girl here a table's width table from his chest, other than himself.

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When he was a child, Soto remembered punching his neighbor in the face. She was four maybe five, same as Soto, and, like many girls of that age had begun to embody a number of traditionally masculine signifiers—independence, assertiveness, determination. She had become a girl who wore ripped denim and small linen workshirts embroidered with bees and daffodils, mud splattered. Whose hair had been cut short and close by her mother with a pair of nail scissors, so that it hung raggedly about her mouth.

For his birthday, Soto's father had bought the boy a chrome tricycle with a red leather seat and handlebars. It was the only gift the man gave him that year. Now that he able to respond to commands, Soto was expected to realize that life would gift him but little that he did not gain for himself.

Soto rarely used the tricycle, preferring to let it remain in the safety of the garage, where weekly he would spend an hour or two spitting on the chrome and rubbing it with a rag that he had made out of an old onesie. This "spit shining" only

caused the chrome to go cloudy. Frustrated, Soto upped the amount of time that he spent polishing his prize. But, the chrome only grew cloudier, until it assumed a smoky sheen.

Soon enough, Soto began to spend hours each day, between returning from daycare at five and dinner at seven, polishing his bike. His father noticed the time Soto put into taking care of his gift, and often would silently leave a small wrapped chocolate on his bed, to award him, anonymously, for his diligence.

It was only when the polishing got in the way of dinner—interrupting the daily routine—that Soto's father ventured into the garage, to check on his child. On the concrete floor, wedged behind the late model Cadillac Coupe de Ville, he found the little man, spitting on the tarnished skeleton of his present, rubbing the little rag hopelessly up and down the metal.

The next morning, Soto's father drove at dawn to the hardware store, and bought a can of chrome polish. When Soto returned that day from daycare, he was perplexed to find a black can placed near his trophy. Somehow, he knew how to use it. He could, without any previous consideration or knowledge, invest it with his consciousness.

Soto's tricycle shone like the shield of Perseus. He was satisfied. This mount would bring him out from the world that was, into the world to be. The world that he would shape and polish into his own—an unbreakable dream

Proudly, the little man strutted out from his garage, tricycle in tow. He had changed his clothes for the occasion. A pair of pressed chinos, a cleaner polo, his faced composed into an expression of deepest solemnity. With a kick, he raised

himself on to the bike. He flattened the wrinkles in his shirt, caused by the mount. When he first tried to pedal, he didn't put enough strength into the push. Soto remembered panicking, slightly, as though all the work that he had put into maintaining the bike's appearance had been a means of avoiding his inability to ride it. He felt the breeze across his face, a light breeze, just a tickle of air. The trees whispered calmly, brought to speech by the wind. They were speaking to him. He could tell. He pushed harder, crushing his foot into the small slab of chrome that acted as his pedal, totally determined. He could do it. He could move this vessel, for it was only a vessel of his will. The world was his, but only if he shaped it to be so. The pedal began to descend, slothfully, toward the ground. It had begun to bend toward his will.

As he forced one pedal down, then the other, Soto noticed that it grew easier to force these objects to do as he pleased. If he wanted to move quickly across the steppes of suburban Maryland, he could. If he wanted to amble about platypus-like, he could. The world had become infinitely traversable. Behind him, the garage, clapboard house, his father, all disappeared. Ahead, the cul de sac loomed. Soto, like Cortez before him, ventured to conquer this as yet untouched land.

Wind behind him, Soto felt resurrected. These previous four or five years had all been a purgatory in which his unformed soul had been imprisoned. He had finally emerged from the dirt of his previous life, restored to the sunlight, the wind, the speed of his wishes.

Across the cul de sac a girl in a linen shirt was playing with a woven rubber ball, bouncing it up and down. Soto tensed his shoulders. This girl had intruded into

his paradise. All at once, in a great rush of what felt like water, Soto's sense of freedom left him. The girl looked at him hard. Soto could feel the power, the force, of her consciousness, as it vectored through him, took stock of his insides.

He continued to pedal, anger mounting. Who was this girl to judge him? After all the work that he had done? The perfect object of his ride, brought to loss. It now seemed to Soto as though the weight and import that he had ascribed his journey was a sham. He could not shape the world at all. He did not deserve anything from it. Everything was slipping away, out of his control. His tears, his labor, his despair and dread, all had been invested in his tricycle, his chariot to journey upon the supralunary black top. He had the foundation for greatness. He had his narrative. What claim did she have upon his experience? If she did not want to fall into line, to act as he would desire, then it would be best for her to disappear.

The sun beat down on the back of Soto's neck. He could feel his skin begin to dry, and he liked the feeling, accepting it into his universe. Down the road he could hear the pleasing mumble of passing cars. The refreshing smell of new grass mingled with the pavement's char. Soon, he realized, it would be time for dinner. His freedom was bounded. He had discovered its temporal limits. And, as with a man stricken by cancer who knows that he will soon die, Soto resolved ever the more strongly to make the most of the time that he did have. Each moment of unencumbered motion became the gift of his own human resolve—the fruits of a certain type of godlessness.

When he reached the girl, he appraised her the way that an auctioneer might a common urn—her ragged hair, stained shirt, distressed jeans. It was only a

superior being who would understand the connection of ancillary rituals to the act that they preceded, how they heightened the act's profundity. If she had been able to understand what was herein at stake, she would not have been playing in the street. Her clothes would have been formal, starched, clean. She would have had the strength, the foresight, to realize her place in his universe. In polishing the bike, in riding it, Soto had grasped the purplish lungs of the eternal. The telos of the world had become manifest as his own. Whether she knew it or not, her purpose was in no way different from his own. At best, she could only exist as an obstacle on his pilgrimage. A challenge that, once overcome, would only imbue the journey with greater profundity. Thus, Soto realized, the girl had placed herself there for his use, for his ultimate end. Now that he had a barrier, another conscious person, he could enact his newfound control.

"Move," he ordered.

"No."

Frustrated, Soto repeated himself.

She ignored him and spiked her rubber ball onto the pavement. The projectile deformed itself against the black surface, before launching toward the sun.

"One," said the girl. She spiked the ball again.

"Two."

Distressed, Soto fidgeted upon his seat. The succession of spikes was potentially endless. Or rather, "endless" was the wrong word. There could be no beginning, and no end, besides that which his neighbor chose, by counting. Each spike was exactly the same as the last. An iteration only identifiable by virtue of the

sequence of which it was a part. So, there was no need to count, as the sequence itself was the only thing that mattered to the game. The ball could not, technically, be dropped. By the same token, it could not be caught. The count would still march, inexorably, onward.

“Three.”

This was madness. No logical process could explain it. The count existed extraneous to the action. One action was supposed to lead to another—not loop eternally. That was how Soto’s father, and Soto, led their lives. If one worked hard, one would succeed; If one polished one’s bike it would shine. And then, here was this girl, flouting an entire way of life. Flouting causality itself. An obstacle, Soto thought. An entire worldview was at stake.

He repeated himself a third time.

The girl caught the ball as it descended. She turned, met Soto’s eyes. Her gaze was so intense that Soto reflexively fixed his eyes on her chin. He noticed a small scar, roughly in the shape of a bird in flight. He imagined this bird soaring across the bisque of her face, trying to escape her.

“You move,” she said. Her voice was low, scratchy, as though emanating from an old radio transmitter.

“I asked first.”

“Yeah but I was here already.”

“So?”

“Just go around, dummy.”

The possibility hadn't occurred to Soto. Regardless, even if it had, he was set upon a particular path. He could not deviate from the path, because it would mean totally reorienting himself in the world. It would mean existing in a different world, separate from the one he currently controlled. Could this girl not see what was so apparent to him? He could not go around. His path had been set for him, by all the choices that he had made previously. Like dominos falling in a line, he had no choice but to push on forward, as the old world collapsed behind.

"That's not how it works, stupid."

"You're stupid."

"Nuh uh. You are."

"You're a jerk."

"I think you're just mad because you know you should move."

"I think you should just go die already."

Soto could feel tears. He bit his lip.

"I hate you!" he yelled.

"I hate you more!"

"I hate you even more!"

Soto was now breathing heavily, gulping up air. The intensity of his sustained emotional distress, coupled with the overwhelming relevance of the argument, as though the entire universe would collapse, was such that he needed a break for a moment, to steel himself.

"I'm not going to move," his neighbor panted.

"You'll move."

"No way."

"I'll make you."

"You can't."

"Ya I can."

Soto dismounted his bike. His destiny bade him to confront this obstacle head on. To grasp it in his hands and mold it to his will. To destroy it completely. The weight of his entire life, present, past, and future, pressed upon him, forced him to stand tall. The very fact of a common telos led him to stand up for the world. For, if we all were possessed by the same metaphysical finalities, then, in every word, every action, we would all communicate the same content, metaphysically, regardless of such a word or action's appearance in reality. This girl's presence challenged the unity of the world in which Soto believed himself to live. The only profitable answer that he could now find to address her challenge was violence.

Soto had learned triumph, the way that good destroyed evil. That evil deserved its destruction. Even, that evil would learn to accept its destruction—would accede its consciousness to the good's control. The flag of Iwo Jima, for instance, propped up by six agents of divine destiny, was a symbol of the inevitable triumph of the good. It betokened a shift in the black sands of the island, a shift of allegiance. The flag like a needle, a vaccination of the earth—the American Flag, symbol of hope and horror—the emblematic good.

Soto had his emblem, his tricycle. And, for him to control the land, to own its allegiance, he needed to ride. This girl would not let him go, so he must remove her. This was his divine mission. The earth was crying out for him, for his gentle rule. He

would raise his hand and strike her down. He would reveal to her the evil of her ways. The world would be righted. She could only be grateful. For, his neighbor could only oppose him, could only be moved to view the world in such a debased way, if she had become so selfishly absorbed in herself, in her own point of view. She had drunk deep from the clear pool of spring water that lay in the center of her heart. It had seeped into her veins. Daffodils bloomed amongst her arteries. This water, which had tasted so sweet, had turned her blood to poison. It had entombed her within herself. Soto could understand the virtues of such self-reliance. But, a self that lived only for the self—was cannibalism. For one to truly live for oneself, one must live for another, first. One must have something to live toward. Angry as he was, Soto pitied this child. He hoped that he could free her from this illusion.

“Move,” he said, one last time, hoping that she would awaken to repentance from within. For, the one who saves herself is truly blessed. She could have taken a step toward clarity. She could have learned how to free herself.

But, she remained where she was.

So be it, Soto thought. He threw his fist. This was his first act of violence, he remembered. He placed his hand on Nina’s neck, and applied pressure. She coughed. Once twice. She had laid herself out on his bed. The shock of her body beneath him, softness contouring to his chest. Her nipples rubbed against him. The veins on his cock pulsed, pumping blood throughout the shaft. He began to thrust. She clamped her ass beneath him. Her back arched violently. Soto anchored her by the throat, hand still pressing down. With the other he slapped her in the face. She winced, and let out a soft coo. Her nails dug into his clenched ass. He could feel the slime of

vaginal lubrication, and it excited and disgusted him. Or, rather, the disgust led to the excitement. He brought his penis outside her body, motioned for her to stand. She rose, and his hand remained on her throat as she turned her back to him, placed her palms on the wall above his bed frame, thrust her ass out. He felt her as if she were finally, for the moment, revealed to him. In that moment, Soto saw her as Elise—the blonde hair, the need, the fear. He punished her for it, slapping her until a bruise formed. He did not want her to repeat previous mistakes. He could not bear it. She was crying, sobbing, telling him to continue. She threw herself against his body. He felt her rapacious hunger. It enflamed his desire. He would take her and fuck her and she would willingly relinquish consciousness. In that moment, the moment of orgasm, she would suddenly emerge from Narcissus' pool, finally freed of herself, shocked at the world's raging beauty.

He grabbed her arm, and threw her down on the bed. She stared at him, wide-eyed, mascara running. She kissed the bottoms of his feet, his shins, his calves. She kissed his thighs and his balls and his cock, running her fingers up and down his shaft, worshipping this object of violence. Gently, Soto removed her hand. He raised her up. He kissed her on the mouth, neck, nipples and belly, surveying her body's landscape. He raised a hand, and she took his fingers in her mouth. The wetness brought him to arousal and he kissed her vulva, softly at first, then with a dog's ferocity. Her thighs tensed and quivered. He bit her clitoris and she moaned, releasing his fingers. He placed a finger inside her pussy, then another. He slapped her and she shuddered. Her pelvis jerked fiercely into the air. He raised with her, head and pussy ascending.

As a monk mortifies his own flesh, whipping it until God enters, so Soto broke down Nina's body. He did what she could not, allowing her to enter the world, and the world to enter her. Tomorrow, she would be scraped, bruised—a cilice of distressed skin. Nina fell limp on the mattress. Her head tilted back almost 180 degrees, toward the window. Her eyes were wide and bright, overwhelmed by vision.



If Narcissus had recognized his reflection, would he still have fallen in love? Self denial begat an imperfect love. Perhaps Narcissus could not bear Echo's address because she addressed him, rather than his image. He could not hide his deficiencies from himself, and could not bear the shame of revelation. She spoke to him in his own tongue, his self-made language. This was the only speech from which he could not hide, those words that could pierce his skin, rend the veil.

He retreated from himself, from this nymph that spoke his words. He pushed her away and she fled into the depths of the earth.

To die of unrequited love was to die weak and willful, unable to overcome disaster. Narcissus touched lips with his reflection, tumbled into the waiting pool. Did the pool represent the world of objects, the self, rapacious self-regard, the void of image, the blackness behind the mirror?

It is absurd that Narcissus did not see himself reflected in that pool. That his only relief from sorrow could be death. This youth whom all loved had, at his core, no substance, no steel. He could not see the world for what it was. He could only view the beauty that others described him to be. The world became that beauty. It became himself. Except, it was only a reflection—a reflection of beauty—upon which Narcissus' eyes fixated. When he tried to touch it, he could only touch surface. When he tried to kiss it, he felt only the cold slap of water.

What drove him to death? He had access to himself, to all his privileged thoughts and feelings. It should have been easy enough, as easy as it would be for anyone, to love himself. It seemed that he had fallen into an ordinary predicament.

Seated at his kitchen table, Soto became afraid that he was unable to recognize himself. Such failure foretold the loss of the world. One would be unable to walk with feet on the ground, unable to breathe, unable to give the things their names. But, how would he know? If he depended, for his written prowess, upon the need to recognize his most true self, sifting it out like gold from the silt of inborn deceptions—if he could not recognize that self anymore, or mistook it for a fake, how would he know? He had no means of independent verification.

Narcissus was the perfect object. Belief, opinion, consciousness of any kind, could only disfigure his perfection. Narcissus attempted to eliminate his depth, reduce himself to surface. He desired no more than to be his own reflection, eternally shallow. But, he could never reach himself. No matter how hard he tried, a piece of himself would leak out, a tear, and deform it.

The oak outside of Soto's apartment had begun to sprout leaves. He could see the green from his window. It bloomed from the oak's spindly branches, dragging the dead wood back into life. Puddles had formed in the churned up earth of Soto's front yard. Soto watched the sun glint off of the brown water. A slight wind rippled the puddles, distorting the sun's reflection into successive crescents. He had not heard from Nina in a few weeks, but thought nothing of it.

He decided to take a walk. In front of him, slabs of pavement had been forced into orogenesis, as though disrupted by some geological micro tectonics. These slabs, composed of sedimentary globules, were composed in the same manner as a novel—words, all compressed together, whether they belonged there or not. A conglomeration of disparate objects given sense by a definite form, rather than concord of essence. Alongside the sidewalk ran a number of rough wooden poles that supported the power lines. The power lines were encased in a thick layer of black rubber, and affixed to the poles with oversize iron staples. For some reason, the lines were kept visible. It would be simpler to put them beneath ground, Soto thought, susceptible as they were in their present position to falling tree branches and strong winds.

Soto walked into the center of town and bought a coffee. He sat near the main intersection, and watched as the town's inhabitants went about their day. Many of those he saw had once been his students. They nodded curtly to him, and he nodded back. A few stopped to talk with him, but he brushed them off with a few perfunctory phrases. He felt that he could not speak to anyone right now. He was enjoying the feeling of being inside his own head.

But, the feeling did not last. He realized that he did not want to speak to any one, because he could not imagine a person worth speaking to. Why couldn't he love himself the way he could love another? Soto returned home, beaten and chagrined. He attempted to write, but could not. He dived into bed and dreamed himself to be a daffodil, wilting in the sun, as all his peers stood tall.



In the overstuffed chair, Soto shifted uncomfortably. Abner sat behind his desk. An expression of concern sharpened his features.

"What were you thinking?"

"That's a good question." Soto could not remember. More accurately, he had no memory. When he tried to remember, all he could conjure was blackness. All he could remember was the aftermath, the acceptance.

"I told you not to," Abner said. "And you promised me."

"I wasn't planning on anything."

"I'm not doubting your honesty. But, I am, frankly, a little disgusted by your weakness."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Soto replied, quietly.

"Legally, no. You haven't. Unfortunately that doesn't matter.

"This would be wrongful termination."

"I never said we were going to fire you. That's not really up to me. I'm just informing you of the situation. But, I do think you should resign."

"No."

"She said you beat her, Kevin."

"I did not."

"I don't think you did, but it doesn't really matter. If you resign, we can help you find another appointment. But, if this turns into a fight—and, I mean, she's filed a complaint already, it's on the record."

"..."

"I presume you'll receive the letter in a few days."

"I don't..."

"It's none of my business. It was in a closed room. Basically it's your word versus hers."

"..."

"But media-wise it's going to look like a classic case of male abuse of authority. So, even if the Title IX case gets thrown out, that guy at the Huffington Post will probably dig you up and skewer you."

"I didn't beat her..."

"I have no opinion either way."

"Nothing happened."

"That remains to be seen."

‡‡

He typed out his resignation, proofread it once, and sent it in. He felt unclean and decided to shower. As the water sprayed down on him, he thought about... about, well, why writing. Why did he choose this path, out of many? What drew him to it?

He fumbled for an answer. He thought of empathy, of love, of kindness, even of money and fame. Nothing quite fit. His hopes for transcendence, setting soul beside soul, letting them rub up against one another, these were all hubris. Or, they were well intentioned, naïve attempts to live above his own disappointments. Money and fame—who wrote for money and fame?

Soto turned his contemplations to emptiness. To the ghosts of his mother, his father, Elise. He never saw her body. To him, it were as though she had simply drifted away, like a piece of wood brought out by the tide. The violence of her departure was belied by the tranquility of her absence.

He felt himself cry. He should have been stronger. He had willingly gone along with Nina, allowed himself to be led. She had been his shepherd and he had been too afraid to choose his own path. Though, the path wound up the mountain, steep and uneven, and anyone would have felt afraid. He had followed and she had slit his throat, sacrificing him.

But, even as one body, one life, collapsed into dust, another would arise, and he would be reborn. These words were the container into which his experience was

poured. They were inseparable from his life. And, as long as he had them, he had himself to a greater or lesser degree. In any book, he could carry himself with him. He could see himself. He could escape.

But, he could also lose himself in a thicket of text. Obsession pinned upon a word, blinding him to what, for others, appeared obvious. The work of his adulthood had been to discover such blindnesses—to root out and destroy them. His entire life he had been sensitive to his own fantasies and this led him to hunt viciously after himself.

He had never expected it with Elise. He didn't know how he could have missed it. She stopped letting him touch her. She stopped speaking. But, she had done that before. She did that whenever she was angry at him. He didn't understand why she was angry, though. Usually there was a fight, a cause. So, when she left, offering no explanation, it broke him almost completely. He blamed himself for whatever wrongs he could imagine. When he could no longer imagine wrongs, he focused upon a feeling of vague despair that had lodged itself in his lower abdomen. He submerged himself in it.

When he learned that Elise had hung herself from a rafter in her parent's garage, he imagined the sound of the rafter creaking. Daylight floated into the garage. It danced in her hair. Birds chirped in the midday afternoon. There was no note, but she had worn a dress, and heels, and had applied her make up.

Her parents had called him, and he went to their house to help with the funeral and wake. He read a eulogy. He was offered condolences, and shook hands that had grown translucent with age. The pastor called Elise a great soul. Soto said

she had been the ideal partner. He made himself believe it. He allowed guilt to consume him, and sacrificed himself to her memory, so that her family only had the beauty to see. None of the cruelty.

Soto stepped out of the shower. He tousled his hair, dried his body. The mirror had steamed up. All that he could see of his face was an indefinite cloud, like looking into chalky water. A sketch of his form. He heard the quiet rumble of the heater, the metallic drip from the faucet. In the mirror, his reflection began to sharpen. It became more and more himself. On the sink there was a drop of blood. One, then two. Little red islands atop a peaceful white ocean. The drain like a whirlpool: everything suddenly depressing. A downward wash of red. Soto saw himself, pale, shaking. His eyes were his eyes. His lips formed a thin gash.

He walked unsteadily to his bedroom. A vision had formed in his head. Either this was the first real, fully intended, act of his entire adult life, or it was superfluous. Overdramatic. He bit down on his lip, hard enough to clarify his vision. There was the bed. Thoreau, the great American Transcendentalist once talked about sitting—allowing the world to present itself to you. Soto had decided, finally, to allow himself to live on differently. He could be what he always was, passing through the scrim of life to eternity. He was always eternal. There would be no life without him. There did not need to be. As Soto sat on the cross-legged on the bed, he closed his eyes, and felt the fear recede.

◇◇◇ IV ◇◇◇

In the end, I chose to forgive. His death was, I decided, a gift. I could not have forgiven him otherwise. He released me. He allowed me my own life, finally.

Belatedly. Now, I had the freedom to choose. I moved toward gossamer strands of light, assuming in them to be the good I sought. I allowed them to envelop me. As I passed through, I felt my body distort. My touch became an invitation. My skin a porous membrane.

Within myself I found a mirrored room. It filled with air, swirling. I attempted to speak to my reflection, but could not. I grew frustrated in the silence.

The joy of reflection had been in simplicity, escape. I would merge with the mirror, with my reflection. We would become a unity, a clarity. The light would illuminate our hands, our skin. In ourselves would be the whispers of another. We would be free from ourselves. We would escape to a utopian oneness.

In vain, I wrote to fill this blank space. I tried to convince myself of my joy. But I would not listen. Thus, I fell silent, and let the feeling pass.